JACK OF THE PONY EXPRESS

FRANK V. WEBSTER

Russell Mauer

CHS-36Q

Russell Maurer

SUNGER SPRANG FORWARD.

JACK OF THE PONY EXPRESS

Or

The Young Rider of the Mountain Trails

BY

FRANK V. WEBSTER

AUTHOR OF "ONLY A FARM BOY," "TWO BOY GOLD MINERS," "BOB CHESTER'S GRIT," "COWBOY DAVE," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

BOOKS FOR BOYS

By FRANK V. WEBSTER

12mo. Cloth. Illustrated.

ONLY A FARM BOY
TOM, THE TELEPHONE BOY
THE BOY FROM THE RANCH
THE YOUNG TREASURER HUNTER
BOB, THE CASTAWAY
THE YOUNG FIREMEN OF LAKEVILLE
THE NEWSBOY PARTNERS
THE BOY PILOT OF THE LAKES
THE TWO BOY GOLD MINERS
JACK, THE RUNAWAY
COMRADES OF THE SADDLE
THE BOYS OF BELLWOOD SCHOOL
THE HIGH SCHOOL RIVALS
BOB CHESTER'S GRIT
AIRSHIP ANDY
DARRY, THE LIFE SAVER
DICK, THE BANK BOY
BEN HARDY'S FLYING MACHINE
THE BOYS OF THE WIRELESS
HARRY WATSON'S HIGH SCHOOL DAYS
THE BOY SCOUTS OF LENOX
TOM TAYLOR AT WEST POINT
COWBOY DAVE
TWO BOYS OF THE BATTLESHIP
JACK OF THE PONY EXPRESS

Cupples & Leon Co., Publishers, New York

Copyright, 1915, by
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

JACK OF THE PONY EXPRESS
Printed in U. S. A.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Jack in the Saddle	1
II.	Postmistress Jennie	10
III.	A Narrow Escape	22
IV.	Important Letters	31
V.	Just in Time	40
VI.	The Secret Mine	47
VII.	The Strangers Again	55
VIII.	A Night Attack	61
IX.	In Bonds	68
X.	A Queer Discovery	76
XI.	Dummy Letters	84
XII.	A Ride for Life	93
XIII.	The Inspector	102
XIV.	The Chase	110
XV.	A Caution	116
XVI.	Sunger Goes Lame	123
XVII.	An Invitation Declined	131
XVIII.	A Queer Feeling	138
XIX.	A Desperate Ride	146
XX.	At Golden Crossing	154

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXI.	The Argent Letters	163
XXII.	The Masked Man	170
XXIII.	The Escape	182
XXIV.	Jack's Idea	190
XXV.	Jack's Trick—Conclusion	200

JACK OF THE PONY EXPRESS

CHAPTER I

JACK IN THE SADDLE

"YOUR father is a little late to-night, isn't he Jack?"

"Yes, Mrs. Watson, he should have been here a half-hour ago, and he would, too, if he had ridden Sunger instead of his own horse."

"You think a lot of that pony of yours, don't you, Jack?" and a motherly-looking woman came to the doorway of a small cottage and peered up the mountain trail, which ran in front of the building. Out on the trail itself stood a tall, bronzed lad, who was, in fact, about seventeen years of age, but whose robust frame and athletic build made him appear several years older.

"Yes, Mrs. Watson," the boy answered with a smile, "I do think a lot of Sunger, and he's worth it, too."

"Yes, I guess he is. And he can travel swiftly, too. My goodness! The way you sometimes clatter past my house makes me think you'll sure have an accident. Sometimes I'm so nervous I can't look at you."

"Sunger is pretty sure-footed, even on worse mountain trails than the one from Rainbow Ridge to Golden Crossing," answered Jack with a laugh, that showed his white, even teeth, which formed a strange contrast to his tanned face.

"Sunger," repeated Mrs. Watson, musingly. "What an odd name. I often wonder how you came to call him that."

"It isn't his real name," explained Jack, as he gave another look up the trail over which the rays of the declining sun were shining, and then walked up to the porch, where he sat down. "The pony was once owned by a Mexican miner, and he named him something in Spanish which meant that the little horse could go so fast that he dodged the sun. Sundodger was what the name would be in English, I suppose, and after I bought him that's what I called him.

"But Sundodger is too much of a mouthful when one's in a hurry," and Jack laughed at his idea, "so," he went on, "I shortened it to Sunger, which does just as well."

"Yes, as long as he knows it," agreed Mrs. Watson. "But I guess, Jack, I had better be go-

ing. I did think I'd wait until your father came, and put the supper on for you both, but he's so late now—"

"Yes, Mrs. Watson, don't wait," interrupted Jack. "I don't know what to make of dad's being so late. But we're used to getting our own meals, so you needn't worry. We'll get along all right."

"Oh, I know you will. For two men—for you are getting so big I shall have to call you a man," and she smiled at him. "For two men you really get along very well indeed."

"Yes, I'm getting to be something of a cook myself," admitted the lad. "But I can't quite equal your biscuits yet, and there's no use saying I can. However, you baked a pretty good batch this afternoon, and dad sure will be pleased when he sees 'em. I wish he'd come while they're hot though," and once more Jack Bailey arose and went out to peer up the trail. He listened intently, but his sharp senses caught no sound of clattering hoofs, nor sight of a horseman coming down the slope, a good view of which could be had from in front of the house that stood on a bend in the road.

"Well, then, I'll be getting along," Mrs. Watson resumed, as she threw a shawl over her shoulders, for, though the day had been warm, there was a coolness in the mountain air with the coming

of night. "Everything is all ready to dish-up," went on the motherly-looking woman, as she went out of the front gate. "The chicken is hot on the back of the stove."

"Oh, we'll make out all right, thank you," called Jack after her, as she started down the trail. Mrs. Watson lived about a quarter of a mile away. Her husband was a miner, and she had a grown daughter, so it was quite convenient for Mrs. Watson to come over twice a week, or oftener on occasions, and do the housework in the cottage where Mr. Peter Bailey and his son Jack lived. Mrs. Watson would do the sweeping, dusting and as much cooking as she had time for, and then go back to her own home.

Jack's mother was dead, and he and his father had managed for some years without the services of a housekeeper. Mr. Bailey was a pony express rider, carrying the mail and small express packages between the settlements of Rainbow Ridge and Golden Crossing. Mr. Bailey and Jack lived on the outskirts of Rainbow Ridge.

This was in the Rocky Mountain country of one of our western states, and the trails were so wild and winding, and, for that matter, so unsafe, that it was out of the question to use a mail or stage coach between the two places.

From Rainbow Ridge, however, there was a stage route going east, which took the mail and

express matter as it was brought in by Mr. Bailey. And from Golden Crossing going west the same arrangement was made. Golden Crossing was a settlement on the banks of the Ponto River, a small enough stream in ordinary times, but which was wild and dangerous during heavy rains or freshets.

So the pony express, as run by Mr. Bailey, was the only regular means of communication between Golden Crossing and Rainbow Ridge. It was of importance, too, for often valuable mail and packages went through, the route being shorter and quicker than by a roundabout stage line.

When Mrs. Watson was out of sight around a bend in the trail, Jack went into the cottage. It really was a cottage, though when Mr. Bailey first brought his family to the West it had been but a cabin, or shack. But Mr. Bailey and his wife had labored hard to make it more of a "home," and they had succeeded very well. Then came the sad occasion of Mrs. Bailey's illness and death, and for a time life had seemed very hard to Jack and his father.

The latter had been interested in mines, but found the work too difficult with his failing health, so he had secured the pony express contract, which he had carried on now for several years.

"It certainly is a shame to have this fine sup-

per spoil," mused Jack, as he lifted the cover from a pot of chicken, and glanced at the pile of browned biscuit in the warming oven.

"I can't understand what makes dad so late," he went on. "Of course, the mail from the Golden Crossing office might not have been ready for him to take. It's been pretty heavy of late, and is almost more than Aunt Matilda can handle. Though I suppose Jennie gives her a hand now and then," and as he said that Jack looked at the photograph on the mantel of an attractive girl, who seemed to smile at him. Jack looked cautiously around the room, and then raised a hand to his lips and threw a kiss from the tips of his fingers at the picture.

This done he blushed—but you would not have known it, he was so bronzed by the sun and the wind. Mrs. Matilda Blake was a distant relative of Mr. Bailey's, and Jack called her "Aunt Matilda," though she really did not bear that relationship to him. She was a widow, and she and her only daughter, Jennie, a girl of about sixteen, lived in Golden Crossing, where Mrs. Blake was postmistress. Jack and Jennie were the best of friends.

"Well, if dad doesn't come pretty soon, I'm going to eat," decided Jack. "He won't mind, I'm sure. But I would like to know what's keeping him. I hope he hasn't had any accident. His

pony is sure-footed, I know, but I'd feel better if he had Sunger."

Jack was plainly nervous—that is as nervous as a young, healthy lad can be. He went outside again, and walked a little way back along the trail over which his father would come. But the trail seemed deserted. The Bailey cottage was in a rather lonely location, there being no other habitation in sight.

There were other houses not far away, and a number in the town, but because of the winding nature of the trail, and the ruggedness of the mountains, they could not be seen from where Jack stood.

As the lad was about to turn back and again enter the cottage with the determination to eat his supper, he heard something which caused him to start.

"Here he comes!" he exclaimed. "But he's walking his horse! That's queer! Something must have happened!"

Speed was one of the prime requisites of the pony express. The men who rode the routes over plains and mountain trails secured the speediest horses or ponies possible. Their life, when in the saddle, was a continual rush, for the mail and express matter must go through as quickly as possible, and where no steam and railroads were available recourse was had to horseflesh. And

knowing the value of speed Jack wondered when he heard the approach of a horse at a walking pace.

Mr. Bailey was supposed to arrive at Rainbow Ridge in time to deliver his express and mail matter to the night stage coach going east, and the hour for its leaving had passed some time since. Of course, the stage would wait for the pony express, but this meant a delay all along the rest of the route.

"Something sure must have happened!" said Jack to himself. "I'll go to meet dad."

He set off on foot, but came running back.

"I'll get Sunger," he told himself, speaking aloud, a habit engendered by the lonliness of the mountains. "He's quite a way off yet, but Sunger will make short work of the distance."

Though the sound of the approaching footsteps of the horse of the pony express rider could be plainly heard by Jack, so clear and resonant was the mountain air, he realized that his father had yet nearly half a mile to travel.

Leaping to the saddle of his pony, and patting the animal lovingly on the neck, Jack set off once more. He went quickly, for Sunger was fresh and eager.

In a few minutes Jack turned at a place where the trail followed a great rocky ledge, and in front of him, almost collapsed in the saddle was

a man. He seemed to sit on his horse only by a great effort, and on his face was a drawn look of pain.

"Why, Dad!" cried Jack. "What's the matter? Has anything happened? Did they hold up the mail?"

"No, the mail and other stuff is all right," was the answer, broken by an exclamation of pain. "But I'm all in, Jack. I'm afraid I'm going to be quite ill. It was all I could do to ride the last few miles, but I wouldn't give in."

Jack was at his father's side in an instant.

"Get on Sunger," he urged. "He's easier for you to ride. Let me help you. What is the trouble? How did it happen?"

"I don't know, Jack, my boy. But I won't change horses. I can keep on until I get to the cabin. Here, you take the mail and express and ride on with it to the stage. I'll keep on toward home. Come back as soon as you can, and you—you'd better bring the doctor with you!" he faltered.

CHAPTER II

POSTMISTRESS JENNIE

For a moment Jack Bailey did not know what to do. He looked at his father, who was evidently quite ill and suffering much pain. Then the lad glanced at the bags of mail and small express matter which lay over the saddle in front of Mr. Bailey.

"Take the mail, Jack, my boy!" the pony express rider exclaimed, with an effort. "Take the mail, so the stage can get off. I'm late now, but I couldn't make the trail any faster. Get the mail through, and then stop and bring a doctor back with you if he'll come."

"But I can't go away and leave you like this, Dad!"

"You must, Jack!"

"But you're too ill!"

"That can't be helped. The mail and express must go through on time if I'm to keep the contract. And I certainly don't want to lose it. I'll manage to get to the cottage. Once there, I can sit down, and if I get a cup of hot tea I may feel

better. It seems to be acute indigestion, though I don't remember eating anything that didn't agree with me. But ride on, Jack. And don't worry. I'll get to the cottage all right and be there when you come back."

"All right, Dad! I'll do it. But I sure do hate to leave you like this!"

"It's better than having the mail delayed. Ride on. Explain to Jed Monty how it is. I think Jed takes the stage out to-night."

"Yes, he does. I'll tell him."

Jack quickly transferred to his own saddle the bags of mail and express matter. Mr. Bailey seemed easier now, though there was still that look of pain on his face.

"Come on, Sunger," called the lad to his pony. "We've got to make time!"

The intelligent and beautiful animal whinnied as if he understood. Then, with a fond and anxious look at his father, Jack wheeled about and set off down the trail at a gallop, Mr. Bailey going on more slowly, for every motion of his horse gave him pain.

Jack was soon out of sight around a bend of the trail. He flashed past his cottage, and thought with satisfaction that there was hot water on the range, so his father could make himself a cup of tea.

Jack paused long enough at Mrs. Watson's

cabin to tell her what was the matter, and to inform her that he was taking the mail over the last mile of the route into town.

"Your father ill!" exclaimed Mrs. Watson. "I'll go right over there, Jack, and look after him."

"I wish you would. It will be awful good of you."

"Of course I'll go. Mary can look after things here," and she hurried into the house to get ready for her second trip that day to the Bailey cottage.

Jack galloped on, trusting to the sure-footedness of his pony to avoid the dangers of the rough mountain trail. And Sunger justified the confidence reposed in him.

"Hello! We've been wondering what kept you! Why, it's Jack!" exclaimed Jed Monty, the grizzled stage driver, as the lad galloped up to the Mansion Hotel, whence the start for the east was made.

"Sorry to be late, but dad's taken sick!" cried Jack, as he flung the bags to the driver.

"Sick, eh? That's too bad. Well, I guess I can make up the lost time. Haven't much of a load on to-night."

The stage was all ready to start, the few passengers having been impatiently waiting.

"Pile in!" cried Jed, and with a crack of his long whip he sent the four horses off at a gallop.

Jack did not linger, but, wheeling his pony, set off for the doctor's office, hoping he would find the physician in. He was fortunate in this respect, and Dr. Brown promised to come at once. Jack did not wait for him, however, but hastened back to the cottage.

There he found that Mrs. Watson had made his father some hot tea, which had relieved him somewhat. The look of pain was not so apparent now.

"The doctor will be here right away," Jack reported. "Now tell me how it happened, Dad. We were quite worried about you."

"Indeed we were, when you didn't come in on time, as you nearly always do," said Mrs. Watson.

"I can't tell just how it did happen," said the pony express rider, "but I was taken with a sharp and sudden pain soon after leaving Golden Crossing. I'd have turned back then, and gotten some one else to ride the route for me, but I knew there were important letters in the mail, and it had to come through. So I kept on, hoping I would get better. But I grew worse, and I had to slow up. I thought I'd never get here! But I did." And he shut his lips grimly.

Pony express riders have to be made of stern stuff and they have to keep on their routes in rain or shine, calm or storm; and often when it is tor-

ture to sit in the saddle on a galloping horse.

"You'd better get your supper, Jack," advised Mrs. Watson.

"No, I don't feel like eating," the lad objected.

"Yes, you'd better, son," said his father. "There's no telling what you may have to do to-night, and it is possible you will have to ride for me to-morrow, though I hope I'll be able. But eat, and keep up your strength."

This was good advice, and Jack realized it. So he sat down to the meal which Mrs. Watson had prepared as a finish to her housekeeping work earlier that day. Jack had scarcely finished when Dr. Brown came in, and spent some time ministering to Mr. Bailey.

The pony express rider felt much relieved after he had been given some quieting medicine, and as Dr. Brown was about to leave Mr. Bailey asked:

"Shall I be able to ride the route to-morrow?"

The physician shook his head.

"No, indeed!" he exclaimed. "I'm sorry to have to tell you that you have a severe illness. I'm afraid you're going to be laid up for several weeks, if not longer. You have been neglecting yourself too long, and you've been worrying haven't you?"

"Well, yes, I have," admited Mr. Bailey.

"Oh, Dad! worrying?" cried Jack. "Is it about that old Harrington matter?"

"Yes, Jack, it is. I can't get that off my mind."

"Why, every one knows that wasn't your fault!" exclaimed Dr. Brown.

"Of course," chimed in Mrs. Watson.

"Well I can't help thinking that the Harrington crowd believes I was to blame," went on the pony express rider. "But I never let that letter get away from me. It never left my bag from the time it was put in until I delivered it. But I can't prove that, and I can't help worrying over what people think of me."

"You're foolish to let a thing like that annoy you," said Dr. Brown. "That's what has helped to make you ill. Now you must take a good rest. I'll be in to see you to-morrow."

"But what about the trail, Doctor? Some one will have to carry the mail."

"You can't!" exclaimed the physician, with decision. "That's certain!"

"I will, Dad, of course!" cried Jack. "Who has a better right than I?"

"Well, I'd like to see you do it, Jack, for I'd be sure the mail and express would be safe with you and Sunger," said the man. "But I don't know that the company will consent. You're not of age—"

"I couldn't ride any better if I were twenty-one than I can now," interrupted Jack. "I'll go

to see Mr. Perkfeld the first thing in the morning. I'll meet the early stage and make the trip to Golden Crossing. Are they all well there?" he asked, trying to make his voice sound indifferent.

"Pretty well," answered his father. "Aunt Matilda is ailing a little, but Jennie is a big help. She handles all the mail alone now. Well, Jack, I guess it's the only thing to do. You see Perkfeld in the morning, and explain things. The only thing I'm afraid of is that he may make the Harrington matter an excuse to take the contract away from me. There are several who want to ride the trail in my place. But do the best you can."

Amos Perkfeld was the president, as well as general manager of several stage and pony express lines. He controlled the one between Golden Crossing and Rainbow Ridge, and it was he who had engaged Mr. Bailey.

The "Harrington matter" had taken place some time before. Tyler Harrington was an influential mine owner, and an important letter had been sent to him by one of his agents. This letter was carried by Mr. Bailey, and, in some manner, the contents of it became known to interests opposed to Mr. Harrington and his associates. In this way they lost in a mining deal.

While there were no open accusations, there

had been hints on the part of the Harrington interests that the pony express rider might have been bribed to let some one open and read the letter on the journey over the mountains. Of course, Mr. Bailey had done nothing of the kind, and he had no idea how the contents of the letter became known. He felt distressed because he was suspected, and worried greatly over the matter. But he could not disprove the unfounded suspicion against him.

As he had admitted, he had been worrying more than usual lately over the affair, and this, with a general run-down condition, and the hardships of his calling, had made him ill.

Mrs. Watson offered to stay all night and help look after Mr. Bailey, and Jack was glad to have her do so. The sick man was a little better in the morning, but far from being able to ride the mail route.

So Jack saddled Sunger and went into town to meet the early morning stage which arrived every other day with mail and express matter to be taken to Golden Crossing and points beyond. The pony express was a connecting line between the two settlements.

To Jack's relief Mr. Perkfeld made no objection to the young man's taking his father's place.

"I can't say just how long it will last," went

on the manager, "but we'll make it a temporary arrangement, anyhow. You've ridden the route before, you say?"

"Yes, twice, when father was laid up with slight ailments."

"Well, do the best you can. And another matter. There are some valuable letters— But never mind. I'll speak about them later," and Mr. Perkfeld turned away. Jack wondered what he had been about to say.

"If there are any valuable letters to be carried," mused the young rider, "I hope none of them gets lost, or that the contents become known. I'll have to be careful."

He was given the bags of mail and light express matter from the stage as soon as it rumbled in, and then Jack set off over the mountain trail to go to Golden Crossing. The trip would take about four hours, and if the other mail matter was ready he would come back with it, making the round trip in about eight or nine hours.

But sometimes there were delays at one end or the other, for accidents happened to the stages once in a while. There had been hold-ups, too, but not since Mr. Bailey had taken charge.

If the stage at Golden Crossing was not on time the pony express rider had to wait for it, sometimes all night. On such occasions Mr. Bailey had stayed with his relative, Mrs. Blake,

and Jack reasoned that he could do the same thing. He caught himself almost wishing that the stage might be late this time, as it would give him a chance for a long visit with his "cousin" Jennie.

On his way past his cottage Jack stopped to see how his father was, and also to report that he had been commissioned, at least temporarily, to carry the mail.

Jack found his father better. Mrs. Watson said she thought it would be best if he could be moved down to her house, and both Jack and Mr. Bailey agreed to this, Dr. Brown sanctioning the suggestion.

"I can look after him better then," said the housekeeper, "and my daughter can help me. And then, too, Jack, if you're delayed and have to be away all night, you'll know that he's being well cared for."

"Yes, it will be best," Jack agreed. And so, as he rode off, preparations were made to transfer Mr. Bailey to the other place.

"Now, Sunger, we'll show 'em what we can do when we carry the mail!" exclaimed Jack, as his faithful pony started off along the mountain trail again.

Nothing of moment occurred on that ride. Jack half-wished that he might be called upon to defend the mail and express from bandits. He

was armed, and he dwelt on the thought of what a hero he might prove himself to be.

But everything was very prosaic. His pony did not even slip and fall, but came through on schedule time, or, rather, a little ahead of it, for Jack urged Sunger on.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Jack!" exclaimed Jennie Blake, as our hero rode up to the post office with the bags. "Why is this? Where's your father?"

"My father is ill. But aren't you glad to see me?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" she answered, and then she seemed obliged to look down very closely at some mail matter she was sorting.

"The in-stage will be five hours late," she said. "A messenger rode in to say that one of the horses died, and he had to take back another. So you'll have to stay over, Jack."

"That's good!" he exclaimed.

"What? Good that a poor horse died?"

"Oh, I don't mean that. But — er — say, what's that big official-looking envelope addressed to you? From Washington, too, and without a stamp," and Jack looked over the girl's shoulder.

"Oh, official letters from the post office department don't require stamps."

"What are you getting official letters for?" Jack wanted to know.

"Why, didn't I tell you?" Jennie asked with

a teasing laugh. "I'm going to be postmistress at Golden Crossing from now on. That's my official appointment! Aren't you going to congratulate me?" and she looked archly at Jack and smiled.

CHAPTER III

A NARROW ESCAPE

"SAY, Jennie, what is this; a joke?" asked Jack, as he leaned up against the table on which was piled the mail and some express matter, for the post office was also used as the headquarters of the pony express company and stage line.

"A joke? The idea! How dare you!" and the young lady appeared to be very indignant, indeed. "A joke! I guess not! Look at that, Mr. Jack Bailey," and she flourished in front of him an important-looking document whereon her name could be discerned in large letters.

"Hum! So you are really postmistress of Golden Crossing," remarked Jack. "Is your mother—"

"Oh, it isn't anything serious," was the quick answer. "But we are going to make certain changes, and—"

"Changes!" cried Jack, in some surprise. "I hope you aren't thinking of going away!"

"Oh, no indeed!" Jennie answered. "We like it too well here. But mother has a chance to do some sewing, at which she can make some much-needed money, and she realized that she would be too busy at that to look after the post office properly. So I said I'd apply for the place. I know all about the work," Jennie went on, "for whenever mother went away I used to look after the mail. Tim does the heavy work, lifting the pouches and packages and all that," and she indicated a red-haired and freckled lad named Timothy Mullane, a genial Irish chap, who did odd jobs around the post office, and in the settlement of Golden Crossing.

"So, with Tim to help me, I felt that I might just as well be the full-fledged postmistress," the girl went on. "As soon as mother had arranged to do this sewing I applied for the place to the President—"

"To the President—in Washington?" cried Jack, in surprise.

"Well, I wrote to the President, though I don't suppose he ever saw my letter," Jennie said. "I thought he appointed all postmasters and postmistresses. But I had an answer from some official of the post office department, and I received the appointment!" she laughed in conclusion.

"So after this, Mr. Jack Bailey, of the pony

express, you'll get the mail from me and deliver it to me."

"No greater pleasure, I'm sure," Jack answered with a low bow, and he also laughed. "When did all this happen?" he asked.

"The letter came yesterday," Jennie answered.

"And I received my temporary appointment this morning," Jack said. "You didn't beat me by very much, Jennie! Shake!" and with true western good fellowship, Jack held out his hand, meeting the warm clasp of the pretty and smiling girl.

The two young persons found much to talk about. Jennie was sorry to hear of the illness of "Uncle Pete," as she called him, and when her mother came in to greet Jack, Mrs. Blake had to hear the whole story over again.

Mrs. Blake was a widow, whose husband had been killed in a mining accident. She was left with Jennie, then a little girl, to bring up, and friends secured for her the place as postmistress of Golden Crossing. She managed to make a living from the money received in this way, and from the sewing she was able to do for the residents of the settlement.

And now, as she explained to Jack, her needlework would take up much of her time, so she and Jennie planned that the latter should be

made postmistress so that she could act officially when her mother was not on hand.

"Of course, I'll help her, Jack," Mrs. Blake said, "for it isn't easy for a young girl to have to do this work."

"And I'll help, too!" cried the young pony express rider.

"I knew you would, Cousin Jack!" Jennie exclaimed, clapping her hands. "But now we must talk business. Let me have your slips to sign, and here is a registered letter that you'd better put in an inside pocket where the stage robbers won't find it," and she laughed merrily at her joke.

There was considerable routine work attached to the post office and to the pony express route, and for some time Jack and Jennie were busy over this. The mail and express matter which Jack had brought in on the back of his pony, Sunger, had already been sent off on the outgoing stage.

"Will you ride back to-night, after the other stage comes in, or will you stay here?" asked Mrs. Blake.

"I guess I'll stay," Jack said. "But I can go back as far as Painted Post," naming a mountain settlement a few miles east of Golden Crossing. "I stopped there on my way here, and Harry Ward said he was going to ride in to

Rainbow Ridge to a dance to-night. I can have him take a message for me, saying the mail will be late. And he can also tell my father that I'll stay over night, and be in early to-morrow morning."

"That would be a good idea," said Mrs. Blake. "We'll try and make you comfortable, Jack."

"Oh, you won't have to try very hard," he laughed. Jennie blushed and smiled, and Mrs. Blake looked wise.

Jack spent that afternoon helping Jennie straighten up her post office, for she had determined on a new arrangement of the tables and desks, which Mrs. Blake had never had time to settle on.

"It's your post office, Jennie," her mother remarked. "Do just as you please as far as the regulations permit."

The in-coming mail was later than had been reported, and did not arrive until nearly dark. In such cases, when a night trip would be necessary over the mountain trail between Golden Crossing and Rainbow Ridge, the pony express rider was permitted to postpone his trip until the next day. The trail was rather dangerous at night, though on occasions, when there had been a bright moon and some important letters and express packages had come in, Mr. Bailey made

the night trip. Jack had done so once, but he did not greatly care to do so again.

But if there were any need of it I'd do it now," he said, though he would have regretted leaving Jennie, with the prospect of a pleasant evening in her company.

However, as it happened, there was nothing of such importance that it could not wait over until the next day, so Jack did not have to ride away. He put up his pony in the express stable, and he and Jennie spent a pleasant evening together.

Jack was a little worried about his father, and made an early start the next morning, carrying the mail and expressage. He made a quick trip and was relieved, on stopping off for a moment at the Watson cabin, to find that his father had passed a fairly comfortable night, and was considerably better.

"But he can't ride the trail yet," said Mrs. Watson.

"And I don't intend to let him!" exclaimed Jack. "I'm going to be the pony rider for a while."

Dr. Brown confirmed what he had at first said—that Mr. Bailey would be ill for a long time, and when this had become known Jack at once made arrangements to be permanently named as rider between Rainbow Ridge and

Golden Crossing. Mr. Perkfeld agreed to this, but, most unexpectedly, some opposition developed among the members of the express firm. It appeared that one of the stockholders wanted the place of express rider for a relative of his. There were several others who wanted the place, and there was quite a scramble for it.

But Jack really had the most logical claim to it, and, as Mr. Perkfeld was able to make the appointment, at least for the time being, it came to Jack.

But there was bitter feeling against him on the part of some unscrupulous men who wanted the place, for it paid well and carried some privileges. It was also an honor.

"You want to watch yourself, son," said Mr. Bailey, rather weakly, to Jack one day, before the lad was about to set out on his ride to Golden Crossing. "Watch yourself, for there is no telling what tricks some of those fellows may be up to."

"Tricks, Dad? What do you mean?" asked Jack in wonder.

"Well, I mean they might try to do something to discredit you. Try to make you late with the mail, or even have you lose a valuable letter or package. They might think, if you failed to deliver promptly, you would lose the place, and they'd have a chance. So be careful. Hold on

to it, for I'll need it when I get well again. My illness is going to cost a pile of money."

"Don't you worry about that Dad!" exclaimed the young mountain trail rider. "I'll watch out, and they won't catch me napping!"

He rode off up the road, followed by the fond looks of his father.

"He's a good boy," murmured Mr. Bailey, "A good boy!"

Once again the in-stage to Golden Crossing was late, but as Jack was told by Jennie on his arrival at her post office that several important pieces of mail were expected, he decided to ride back with the pouches, even if it was after dark.

"There's half a moon," he said, "and I know the trail like a book. I'll make a night ride of it."

While waiting for the stage to come in Jack remained about the post office. Among those who came in for mail was Jake Tantrell, one of the men who had tried unsuccessfully to get Jack's place.

"Goin' back to-night?" he inquired casually.

"Yes," Jack answered. "Anything you want carried?"

"No," was the surly answer. "An' if I had I wouldn't trust a kid like you with it! It's a man's job to ride pony express, an' I'm surprised that they let you have the place."

"Oh, if that's the way you feel about it, I don't

want to take any of your stuff," snapped Jack. filled with indignation. "But I've made good so far, and I expect to keep on."

"Huh! Maybe you will, an' maybe you won't!" was the snarling retort.

It was quite dark when Jack finally started with the mail. He also had several express packages, one of which was securely sealed, indicating that it contained valuables.

"Guess I'll stow that away in an inside pocket," Jack said to himself, and he suited the action to the words.

The first part of the trail leading out from Golden Crossing was not especially bad, and Jack ambled along it slowly enough. About two miles out from the settlement he had to cross, on a rather frail wooden bridge, a rushing mountain stream.

As Jack neared the middle of the bridge he felt a plank suddenly give way with the pony. In an instant he clapped his heels to the side of the horse, and slapped him sharply on the flank.

Sunger sprang forward, and only just in time, for in another second he would have stepped through a hole in the bridge where a plank had fallen off into the stream below. And had the pony fallen Jack would probably have been thrown over the bridge railing into the water.

CHAPTER IV

IMPORTANT LETTERS

"WHOA! Steady old boy! Easy now!"

Thus Jack exclaimed, as he leaped from the saddle and held the reins lightly to restrain Sunger.

The pony snorted, whinnied, and, after prancing about a few moments, stood still.

"That's better!" commented Jack. "Now let's see what happened."

There was, as Jack said, "half a moon," and by the light of this he was able to see, as he glanced over the part of the bridge he had traversed, a place where a plank had fallen out. A gap was left—a gap wide enough to have allowed a horse's leg to slip through, with disastrous results to animal and rider.

"Well, Sunger, old boy," went on Jack, "did we do that; did it just happen of itself; or was it done on purpose?"

For, in a second's flash, there had come to him his father's warning.

"Well, if it's some one after my job, it's a

mean trick they have played in trying to get it," mused Jack, aloud. "I wouldn't so much mind for myself, for I guess I could have swum out all right. But I guess you'd have been pretty well banged up, old boy," and he patted his pony, which now had gotten over his first fright.

Jack, whose wildly-beating heart had now somewhat calmed itself, stood beside his faithful pony and considered what his next move had best be. Among other thoughts was the one that he must, in some way, repair the bridge so that any one coming after him would not slip through the holes left where the misplaced planks had fallen into the stream.

"I can get a couple of logs or some big branches in the woods," thought Jack, "and stick them in the holes."

Instinctively he looked to see if the mail and express pouches were safe. Yes, there they were on the saddle front. None of them had slipped off when the pony rider himself had so narrowly escaped.

Then, with a quick motion, Jack's hand went to the breast pocket of his coat, where he had placed the small, sealed express package. To his consternation he felt no bulky protuberance there, such as would have been made by the parcel.

"Whew!" whistled Jack. "Great Scott! I hope I haven't lost that!"

It was very possible that he might have done so, for he remembered pitching forward on his pony's neck, as he leaned over to save himself. The package could easily have slipped from his pocket.

In a veritable frenzy of alarm, Jack rapidly searched through his other pockets, thinking he might, by some chance, have thrust the valuable parcel into one other than the first he had selected as being the most secure. But it was not to be found.

"Just my luck!" he cried aloud. "It's lost. This will end my services as a pony express rider!"

His steed whinnied, thinking, perhaps, that his master might have been speaking to him, as Jack frequently did. Indeed, the lad often talked to his horse as one might to a human being, and Jack stoutly maintained that Sunger understood as much if not more than some people.

"Well, if it's gone, it's gone," Jack said, sadly enough. "And it wasn't my fault, either. I couldn't know those planks in the bridge were loose. It's lucky Sunger felt them giving in time, and gave me the alarm, or we might both be lying somewhere with broken legs, if not worse."

He glanced back to the place where the accident had so nearly occurred. In the gleam of the moon he could see two black streaks in the

otherwise level flooring of the bridge, the planks of which were white from the bleaching of the sun and the dust of the mountain trail.

"That's where I nearly went through," mused Jack. Hardly had the thought come to him than he saw, lying on the very edge of one of the black openings, a small, light object.

"Jove! If that could be it!" he murmured. Cautiously he started toward it, in fear lest the vibration of his steps jar the sealed packet into the stream, for that it was the sealed packet Jack now felt sure.

As the lad started forward his horse followed him, so well trained was Sunger.

"No; stay back, old fellow!" Jack exclaimed. The pony, whinnying, obeyed. Jack noticed that one of the mail bags was hanging loose, as if about to fall, but he reasoned that he could fasten that securely after he had learned whether or not the white object was the package missing from his pocket.

Cautiously he approached, and there, lying on the very verge of one of the openings made by the missing planks, was the packet, which Jack was sure contained jewelry, if not money.

"Well, if this isn't lucky!" he cried, as he picked it up, and thrust it into the bottom of his inside vest pocket. "Just pure luck! You won't get out again," he added, patting the package.

It was the work of but a few minutes to drag from the nearby woods some big branches to fill in the holes left by the missing planks. Of course, the branches did not make the bridge secure, but they could easily be seen, even after the moon went down, and would warn chance passersby of the danger. There was a chance that some one might come after Jack passed, though the pony express trail was one not often followed after nightfall.

Jack tried to ascertain by careful looking how the planks had come to give way under the hoofs of his steed. But there was no clew that he could discover. The bridge was not a carefully made one, and it would have been an easy matter for any one to so loosen a couple of the planks that the least motion would send them into the stream below.

"But who would want to do a thing like that?" Jack reasoned. "I might have been killed, and so might Sunger. Well, all's well that ends well, I guess. Now I'd better be getting along."

The bridge was as secure as Jack could make it in his haste, and having made sure that nothing was missing from the mail and express pouches, and fastening them securely, he mounted his horse again, and set off at a lively pace. For a while he was worried lest his pony might have strained a shoulder or a tendon, but Sunger ap-

peared to be none the worse for the adventure.

Jack rode on, and had covered about half the distance to Rainbow Ridge when he heard, on the trail ahead of him, the sounds of other hoof-beats. At first he thought it might be the echo of his own, but a moment of listening told him it was some one else on the road.

"I wonder who it can be," he asked himself.

He saw a few minutes later. It was Jake Tantrell, the man who had sneered at him—the man who was anxious to have his place. Was it fancy, or did Tantrell start and draw back his horse at sight of Jack.

"Look out for the bridge," Jack called as he passed the man, making up his mind, even though the fellow had scorned him, that he could do no less than warn him. "A couple of planks gave way with me a while ago."

"Oh—er—they did! Planks gave way?" Tantrell stammered.

"Yes," Jack said. "I nearly had a bad fall."

He said nothing about the dropped package.

"Well, that's too bad," the man said. "They ought to fix that bridge."

"Some one did," said Jack.

"Eh? What's that?"

"I said some one did. I mean some one fixed it for me, I think."

"What—what do you mean?"

"I mean those planks never came loose by themselves. I stuck a couple of branches in the holes. Look out when you ride over."

"Oh—I—I will. Thanks!" the man exclaimed, almost as an afterthought.

Then Jack rode on, and Tantrell passed him, giving the lad a sharp glance in the gloom, for the moon was now down below the hills.

Rather shaken by his night's adventure, and a bit anxious, Jack finally reached his own cottage. He turned in there, preferring to do so rather than to awaken Mrs. Watson and her family at this hour, though he was anxious to know how his father was feeling.

"But I guess he must be all right, or they'd have sent me some word," reasoned Jack.

He put his horse in the stable, and, after a hasty lunch from the cupboard, turned into his own room, and slept soundly until morning. He was up early in order to deliver the mail for the stage which would soon go out, and among the things he turned over to the driver was the package that had so nearly been lost.

"I'm glad to get rid of that," he said to Jed Monty. "It looks as if it's worth something," and he pointed to the many seals.

"That's so, it does," Jed replied. "Guess I'll stow it in a safe place myself."

Jack gave a warning about the missing planks

of the bridge, and the road commissioner promised to have repairs made. The lad said nothing of his suspicions that the planks had intentionally been loosened, for he felt it would do no good.

"I'll just keep my eyes open myself," he reasoned, "and maybe I can find out a few things. It might be that some one who wants to be a pony express rider in my place might try to make trouble for me in that way. Maybe they didn't actually want to harm me or my horse, but they might have wanted me to lose some mail. But I didn't!"

For the next few days nothing of moment occurred. Jack rode the trail without anything happening to him, and there were only light loads to carry. His father improved slightly, but Dr. Brown predicted that it would be at least two months before he could be out.

At Golden Crossing Jennie was busy with her post office duties, but she found time to spend a few hours with Jack when he was at the settlement.

It was one morning when the young rider went to the Mansion Hotel, as the one hostelry in Rainbow Ridge was called, that Samuel Argent, who had once been a prominent miner, but who had lost several fortunes, came to the stage station and post office with several letters in his hand. Each one was sealed with red wax.

"Going to make the trip straight through today, Jack?" he asked, for he knew the lad slightly, though better acquainted with his father.

"Yes, I expect to, Mr. Argent," was the answer. "Is there anything I can do for you?" Jack often executed small commissions, for which he was paid extra.

"Well, this is in your regular line," the miner said, "but I have some important letters here, and I'd rather give them to you, personally, than put them in the mail. I'd like to have you hand them over to the Golden Crossing stage man and—"

At that moment a man came running out of the hotel. He waved his hand to Mr. Argent.

"Don't send those letters!" he exclaimed, and he seemed quite excited. "Hold 'em! Don't let Jack take 'em!"

CHAPTER V

JUST IN TIME

MR. ARGENT paused in the act of handing the sealed documents to the young pony express rider, and turned to look at the man who had called to him. Jack recognized him as a mining expert who did assaying. He had not lived in Rainbow Ridge long, but he had done considerable work elsewhere for Mr. Argent.

"What's that you said?" inquired the miner.

"I said, don't send those letters by Jack!"

The young pony rider felt the hot blood come into his cheeks. To him there seemed to be but one meaning in the warning. He was being distrusted. The service which he performed in riding at top speed from Rainbow Ridge to Golden Crossing was under suspicion.

Was this because of the letter that had put his father under suspicion—the Harrington epistle—or was it because of false reports being spread by those who wanted Jack's place?

Something of what was passing through Jack's mind seemed to communicate itself to the mining assayist, whose name was Payson Wayde. He smiled at our hero, and said:

"Don't worry, my lad. It isn't that I think you wouldn't carry the mail safely. It's that I have just heard something," he went on, turning to Mr. Argent, "that makes it advisable to postpone the sending of those letters now. Hold them until we can investigate a bit."

"Oh, that's different," the miner said. "I thought from the way you spoke that you didn't want Jack to take them."

"Well, I don't; that is, I don't want him to take them just yet. Perhaps you won't want to send them for a week or more after you hear what I have to say," he went on to his employer. "But when we do send them you shall take them, Jack," he said, with a smile of confidence.

The young pony express lad felt better on hearing this.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked the two men.

"Not this trip, Jack, I guess," was the answer from Mr. Argent. "I may have something for you day after to-morrow, though. Not these letters, but some more samples I want checked up. I'll see you on your return trip."

"All right, Mr. Argent. Then I'll be getting

along." And, having secured his pouches of mail and express stuff to the saddle, Jack leaped to the back of Sunger and was off at a gallop.

"A fine lad," murmured Mr. Wayde to the miner, as they turned back to the hotel.

"Yes, indeed. I was afraid you were going to hurt his feelings by saying it wouldn't be safe to send mail by him."

"Oh, no, indeed. I guess you can trust him, can't you?"

"I should say so! Jack is really doing his father's work, you see, Mr. Bailey being laid up with a severe illness. Jack is working hard to make good on this express route, and I'd hate to see him lose it, though there are several around here who would be glad to take his place. But what's up—why didn't you want me to mail these letters, after our agreement of last night?"

"I'll tell you. I think some of your enemies have gotten wind of what is going on."

"You mean about the new claim I'm going to stake?"

"Hush!" the other cautioned him. "No use in talking secrets out here. Come to my room and I'll tell you all about it. Perhaps it may be well to take Jack Bailey into your confidence a little later. You can decide on that after I've told you just what came to me."

"Well, it all seems a bit mysterious," com-

mented Mr. Argent, "but maybe you know what you're talking about."

And as Jack rode off on his usual trip, the two mining men went into the hotel deeply engaged in conversation.

Jack had several stops to make that morning before getting on the more lonesome part of the trail, where he could give Sunger free rein to make as good time as possible. In some places this would only be a walk, for the road was treacherous and difficult. In other places along a comparatively level slope, or down grade, Sunger would make up for lost time.

As Jack made a turn in the road, he saw, riding ahead of him, two men on horseback. They turned in their saddles at the sound of his steed's hoof-beats, and Jack recognized one of the men as Jake Tantrell. The other man was a stranger to the pony rider.

"I hope Jake doesn't take it into his head to give me some mean talk now," mused Jack.

He made up his mind not to speak to the fellow, but he reckoned without Jake. For as Jack came up the bully held up a hand as a signal to halt. Jack was not a little apprehensive at first, but Jake, in surly tones, only asked:

"You got anything for me?"

"Not this trip," answered Jack.

"Well, I'm expectin' a package and it ought

to be here. Keep your eyes open for it, young feller, and don't lose it," was the unnecessary caution. "It's a valuable package."

"I'm not in the habit of losing things," Jack answered, with dignity. As he rode on he heard the stranger remark to Jake:

"They ought to be there now?" oughtn't they?"

"Yes," was the reply. "They ought to be there now. But I'm not so sure they'll get what they want. She's a plucky little girl, and she may be so spunky she won't answer their questions."

"Well, they know how to make her," responded the stranger.

"Humph!" mused Jack, as he heard this. "I wonder who it is they are going to try to make answer questions? A spunky little girl, so Jake said. I wonder—"

It suddenly flashed into his mind.

"Could it be Jennie? She's in the post office, and she's sometimes there alone! If some one should try to find out something about the mail or express business they had no right to know!"

Jack hardly knew what to think. But there came a sudden desire in his heart to be near Jennie—to be ready in case she called.

"Come on, Sunger, hit it up!" Jack cried, as this idea came to him. "We've got to hustle and get to Golden Crossing as soon as we can!"

The intelligent beast appeared to know what was said to him, and increased his pace. Jack thundered over the bridge where once he had so nearly had an accident. He thought of the loosened planks, which had been fixed, and again he wondered who had misplaced them—if it had been done by design.

On and on he rode over the trail, until he swung into Golden Crossing. He was ahead of time, and the crowd that usually congregated about the post office to wait for the sorting of the mail was not there.

The road about the little office was thick with dust, and the feet of Jack's pony made scarcely a sound as he rode up. As he leaped to the ground he heard through the open windows of the place voices in loud conversation. One voice was that of a man, and said:

"Well, now, miss, you'd better tell us what we want to know. We'll find out somehow, and the more trouble you give us, the more trouble we'll give you. If you don't—"

"There's no use asking me!" broke in the voice of Postmistress Jennie herself. "You're not going to get that information, and the sooner you understand that the better!"

"Say!" exclaimed the third voice—that of a man—if you don't tell us, we'll—"

"Mail!" cried Jack, in a loud voice, as he

sprang into the place through the window. "I thought I was too early, but I guess I'm just in time," he grimly added, as he swung around and faced two men who stood in front of Jennie Blake.

CHAPTER VI

THE SECRET MINE

WHETHER the young postmistress, or the two strange men, was the more surprised could not be told. Both Jennie and her annoyers started at the sudden appearance of the young pony rider. Then looks of anger and annoyance came over the faces of the two men, while Jennie appeared relieved.

"What's the trouble?" asked Jack, and with a seemingly careless motion he threw open his coat. In his belt was a revolver, which he carried more because the regulations compelled him to than because he really thought he would ever need it.

"Trouble? There's no trouble," said one of the men in surly tones. "Who are you, anyhow, to come butting in?"

"Oh, Jack!" exclaimed Jennie. "They want—"

"I'm the pony express rider on this route," interrupted Jack, with a nod at Jennie, as if to beg her pardon for not letting her finish. "I just came in with the mail. It's outside, but I thought I heard some trouble in here, so I just jumped

in—just in time, perhaps, too," he added, significantly.

"If you're looking for trouble," began one of the men, "I guess we can accommodate you."

"That's enough,' his companion said. "Come on out. Don't you know when to quit?"

"Oh, Jack, they were so annoying!" cried Jennie. "They came in here when I was all alone, and insisted on knowing the times when all the mails and express shipments went out and came in. I said I wasn't supposed to tell strangers that unless there was a particular reason why they should know. Ought I to have told them? They said if I didn't they would make trouble for me."

"They'd better try it!" Jack exclaimed, with flashing eyes. "Now, look here, you fellows!" he went on. "I don't know who you are, nor what your game is, but you'd better get out of here. This is government property, and I'm a government employee for the time being, and I've got authority to order you out of here. Now, you—get!"

For a moment one of the men hesitated, though the other seemed anxious to leave. Jack threw open the door, and pointed in the direction of the trail outside.

"Get out!" he exclaimed again, "and if you think I'm not big enough to handle you I can get

help. Tim!" he called, as he saw the doughty red-haired youth who helped Jennie, "just come in here, will you?"

"Why sure I will, Jack," was the answer, Tim having just loomed into sight. "I didn't know you were here. Is there mail to carry out?"

"Well, there are a couple of *males* who need putting out, if not carrying out," said Jack, smiling grimly at his play upon the words.

"Come on!" muttered the more conciliatory of the two intruders, and with black looks at Jack and Jennie, the two men left the post office.

"Were those the men?" asked Tim, coming in as the two went off down the rail.

"Yes," said Jack. "But they saved us the trouble of carrying them out. Now, Jennie, what was it all about?"

For a moment the girl seemed on the verge of tears, and Jack found himself earnestly hoping that she would not have hysterics. But she bravely conquered her inclination.

"Oh, Jack! I'm so glad you came!" she exclaimed, as she held out both her hands, which the young pony rider clasped warmly.

"I guess this is no place for me!" muttered Tim, with a sly wink.

"Oh, yes, Tim, stay!" Jennie begged. "I'll tell you about it, too. You'll want to know in case these men ever come back."

"If they do!" exclaimed Jack, doubling up his fists, "I'll—"

"Oh, please don't fight with them!" pleaded Jennie. "Just let the sheriff deal with them, Jack."

"Well, if I can't manage them myself, I'll call for help," promised the youth. "But now tell me about it. Who were they?"

"I don't know, Jack. They are strangers around here. I was working all alone in the office, getting my reports into shape, and was just going to check up my stamps, when they came in. I had left the private door open, as I didn't expect any one. Mother is away for the day, but I didn't in the least mind being left, as I had a lot of work to do.

"Well, these men began asking all sorts of questions. I don't mind giving information to strangers if it's the kind I can safely let out of the office, but they wanted to know too much. Why, they even asked about you!"

"They did? Why, they didn't seem to know me just now!"

"Perhaps they didn't by sight, but they knew your name, and they asked me how often you made the trips, where you stopped, how long it took, and they even wanted to know what kind of a horse you rode.

"I simply refused to tell them, and then they

began to threaten and bluster. I was beginning to get frightened, but I made up my mind I wouldn't give in to them. And then—well, you came along, and I guess I never was so glad to see you, Jack! But, of course, they really did me no harm. How did it happen that you got here ahead of time?"

"Oh, I just hurried, that was all," Jack answered. He did not want to tell Jennie what he had overheard on the road. It might make her nervous, as she might think there was some plot afoot to rob the post office.

"And there is something in the wind, or I'm mistaken," mused Jack, "though what it is I can't guess. I'm going to be on the watch harder than ever. The plot is beginning to thicken, as they say in stories," and he made a mental picture of the two men.

The stage coach came in a little later, and Jack received a number of parcels for transmission to Rainbow Ridge. As he was ahead of time, and as there was some mail of importance, Jack resolved to make an immediate trip back, though he would not arrive at the other end of the trail until after dark.

"Oh, Jack! Do you think it will be safe?" Jennie asked.

"What safe?" he asked, with a smile. "The mail?"

"No—you!"

"Why shouldn't I be safe? I've ridden the trail before after dark."

"I know. But those—those men—"

"Nonsense! I'm not afraid."

"Nevertheless, Jack was a little nervous as he galloped along the mountain path after night had fallen. He started at every little noise, for while there had been no robberies of the mail for some time, still such things were known to happen occasionally.

But the two strangers who had annoyed Jennie were not seen around town after the episode, and Jack did not think they were desperate enough to try to hold him up. Besides, while there were some letters and parcels of importance, there was not enough of value in the pouches this trip to make it an inducement for robbery.

"They wouldn't take the risk for what I've got with me," reasoned Jack. And he was right. At least there was no attack on him, and he reached Rainbow Ridge safely and delivered his stuff.

Mr. Bailey was not quite so well next day, and Jack was worried about him. But Dr. Brown said the ailment, which was a form of intermittent fever, might often take a turn like that. Jack said nothing to his father about the two men who had annoyed his cousin, but he did report the oc-

currence to Mr. Perkfeld, who promised to have an investigation made.

But nothing was heard of the men, nor could any trace of them be found, after a somewhat limited search was made.

"I guess they were just fresh tenderfeet," said the manager of the pony express company.

Jack, however, did not altogether share this view.

It was about a week after this that, as Jack reached the Mansion Hotel one morning to receive the mail, he was approached by Mr. Argent, who had a number of red-sealed letters in his hand.

"This time I'm really going to let you take them, Jack," he said. "My friend Wayde thinks it's all right to forward them to their destination now."

"Are they as important as ever?" asked Jack, with a smile.

"Yes, and more so, Jack. I'll just give you a hint," the miner said, in a low voice. "Wayde and I have discovered a secret mine, and if things go right it may mean a big thing for us."

"A secret mine?" questioned the young pony express rider.

"Yes. It was one located by a prospector some years ago, but he died after he came into town with some mighty rich nuggets. He gave

the location of the mine to a friend, but the latter lost the papers and never could find the claim. Lately a relative discovered the documents in an old coat pocket, and sent them to me, suggesting that we work the claim on shares.

"I went into it with Wayde, and we've found the mine. It's rich, too, and it isn't far from here. But there are certain legal forms to comply with before we can actually begin work, and these letters refer to those matters. The reason Wayde didn't want to send them the other time was because he feared a counter legal move on the part of some men who are trying to locate the mine and get it away from those entitled to it. But now matters are about straightened out, and I'm going to send off these letters by you. I'll expect answers back soon, and when they come—"

Mr. Argent paused suddenly, for a sound came from around the corner of the porch where he and Jack had been standing during their talk. The miner suddenly turned the corner of the hotel, with Jack following. They saw a man walking rapidly away along the other part of the porch.

CHAPTER VII

THE STRANGERS AGAIN

"WAS he listening?" asked Jack of the miner.

"It rather looks so," was the answer. "I thought I heard some one moving about there as I was talking to you, and I wanted to make sure."

"Well, you did all right," replied Jack, grimly. "Do you know who he is?"

"No, but—"

"Say! Wait a minute!" suddenly exclaimed Jack. He had but a glimpse of the man's back, but there seemed to be something familiar about the manner in which the man walked off. Like a flash it came to Jack.

"I think I know him—at least I've seen him before," he said hurriedly to Mr. Argent. "I'm going to find out for sure."

In a flash Jack had sprung over the porch railing, and was rapidly running alongside the porch on the soft grass. He did this in order to get ahead of the retreating man. Had he remained on the porch Jack's footfalls on the boards would have given the alarm.

As it was, he was able to get ahead of the eavesdropper, and obtain a view of his face. And Jack was not mistaken in his surmise. It was one of the two men who had annoyed Jennie in the post office. The fellow seemed startled on confronting our hero.

"So you're here now, eh?" asked Jack.

"Well, is that any of your business?" was the challenge. "Isn't this a free country?"

"Of course," Jack answered. "But even in a free country there are certain laws about causing trouble, and listening to private talk."

"Who was listening?" demanded the fellow.

"You were!" Jack exclaimed.

At that moment Mr. Argent came sauntering along the piazza. The fellow turned sharply. Neither appeared to recognize the other.

"This chap is the same one I thought he was," explained Jack. "It was he and a partner of his who made the fuss in the Golden Crossing office, Mr. Argent. If you could find Mr. Perkfeld we might make a charge against him."

The man seemed disconcerted at this.

"Charge? What charge?" he blustered.

"You'll find out soon enough," Jack replied.

He started off, thinking Mr. Argent would keep the man there until Mr. Perkfield could be summoned. But the fellow made a sudden dash, leaped to the saddle of a horse that was near the

end of the porch, and was off down the road on a gallop.

As he rode off he was joined by another man, who also made a hurried exit from the hotel and leaped to the back of his horse. But he was not so quick but what Jack recognized him as the other man who had annoyed the young postmistress of Golden Crossing.

"Well, they got away!" Jack said, regretfully, as he came back to Mr. Argent.

"Perhaps it's just as well," answered the miner. "I don't know that you could have really held them on the charge of being impudent and rough to Miss Blake, and you tell me that is all they did."

"Yes, that's so. But what about one of them listening to what you were telling me about the secret mine."

"Oh, bless you, that doesn't worry me!" said Mr. Argent, with a laugh. "I'll defy anybody to find that mine without the proper directions, and I don't intend to tell even you those, Jack—at least not yet. I really didn't let out any information of any account, and what that chap overheard, if he heard anything, won't do him any good. I'm not worrying, but, of course, I don't like to have strangers sneak up and listen to what I say. But no great harm has been done."

"I'm glad of it. And perhaps it's just as well

we didn't have them arrested. It would make it unpleasant for Jennie to be brought into court."

"That's right, Jack. Well, the fellows got away, so we won't worry about them. Now take these letters, and I needn't tell you to be careful of them."

"I sure will look out for them," Jack promised, earnestly.

"And just mention them to your cousin at the other end of the line," went on the miner. "Have her use a little extra care."

"I'll tell her," promised Jack.

"Another matter," went on the miner, and this time he lowered his voice to a whisper as if afraid of being overheard. "These letters aren't so important as their answers will be."

"What do you mean?" asked Jack.

"I mean that we expect some legal documents by mail, after these letters have reached those for whom they are intended," answered the miner. "The replies will be very important, and I wouldn't want them to fall into the hands of those who are trying to get the property away from us.

"So if you'll just mention to your cousin to bear in mind when any letters like these come for me that they're important, and if you'll remember that yourself, Jack, why, we'll be much obliged to you."

"I sure will be on the watch," promised Jack. "They'll be registered, of course."

"Oh sure! But I don't imagine anything will happen to them. For no one can know exactly when they will come. Only be on the watch for them."

"I certainly will! Now if you'll give me those I'll put them in a safe place."

Mr. Argent handed over the missives, and Jack put them in his inside pocket, and then used a safety pin to close the opening.

"Safety first!" he exclaimed with a laugh.

"That's right," assented the miner.

As Jack rode off on the back of his pony, which was becoming quite famous because of his speed and the regularity with which he made the trips, the young express rider thought of the two strangers who had suddenly reappeared after having annoyed Jennie.

"I just wonder who they are, and what their game is," he reflected. "After all, maybe it would have been a good thing if we had caught them. I guess Jennie would be game enough to go to court and testify. But I don't know on just what charge we could have held them.

"Anyhow, we haven't got 'em, so perhaps it's all for the best. But I sure will be on the watch for them again. And I'll have to be on the lookout for the replies to these letters. Well, it's all

in the game," Jack reflected. "Dad probably has gone through the same, and worse, maybe, and he never backed down. I've got to keep up his reputation, if I'm doing his work. It would be fine, too, if I could find some way of proving that he wasn't at fault in that Harrington matter. But I suppose that's too much to expect."

Thus reflecting, Jack rode on.

CHAPTER VIII

A NIGHT ATTACK

NATURALLY, after the little experience of the morning, having received the sealed letters, and having again seen the two men who had acted so roughly toward Jennie, Jack was a little apprehensive as he rode along the trail toward Golden Crossing. There were several places very favorable for holding up a stage coach, had one used the mountain road, but, as has been said, the route was too difficult for a vehicle to traverse.

"Though they might hold me up, more easily than they could a coach if they wanted to," reflected Jack. Consequently he approached all suspicious places with more than his usual caution.

But as he covered mile after mile and nothing happened, he became easier in his mind.

"I guess they aren't going to have a try for us, after all, Sunger," he said to his faithful pony. The plucky creature whinnied in answer, as Jack patted his neck.

"It wouldn't do 'em much good to make us

stand and deliver," mused the young express rider. For Mr. Argent said these letters weren't of prime importance. Still, I wouldn't like to have them taken away from me, or lose them, and get a bad reputation in this business. I don't want to lose my job just now, when dad is laid up."

Jack had feared that the two strangers who had fled in such a hurry from the hotel in Rainbow Ridge, might at least try to annoy him on the road, as they had taken the trail leading up the mountain to Golden Crossing.

But nothing like this happened, and in due time Jack arrived at the other post office and was greeted by Jennie. Jack gave Jennie the message about Mr. Argent's letters, but said nothing to her about having again seen the two men who had annoyed her.

"It would only worry her," he reflected, "and she has worries enough without my adding to them."

Jack remained that night in Golden Crossing, spending a pleasant evening with Aunt Matilda and Jennie. He was off early the next morning for the ride to Rainbow Ridge. Having delivered the mail, and before going to see his father, Jack made some inquiries around the Mansion Hotel about the two strangers who had left so suddenly.

No one knew much about them, except that they had ridden in early the previous morning, and had eaten a hasty breakfast. It had been observed that they kept well to themselves, and conversed in low tones.

Then had come the episode of the listening on the part of one, and the flight of both of them. That was really all Jack could learn.

"And as long as you didn't see anything of them on the road," said Mr. Argent, "I guess you needn't worry. You got my letters off all right?"

"Oh yes."

"Well, now the next thing will be the replies. Watch out for them."

And Jack said he would.

The young pony express rider had a few hours' spare time that day, and he spent them with his father. Mr. Bailey was discouraged at the progress he was making.

"I don't seem to get at all better, Jack," he complained.

"Well, Dad, it takes time, Dr. Brown says," his son observed.

"I know. But it seems as if I ought to get stronger. I want to be back at work."

"Oh, don't worry about that, Dad! I'm on the job, you know. I may not be doing as well as you, but I'm taking the mail and express stuff back

and forth, and I haven't heard any complaints yet."

"Then you haven't lost anything, Jack, and nothing has been taken from you?"

"No, Dad. Not a thing."

"And the contents of no important letters have leaked out?"

"Not yet. But I know what you're thinking of, Dad. It's about that Harrington letter."

"Yes, Jack, I am. I wish I could prove that it wasn't my fault."

"Don't worry, Dad! Your friends know it wasn't your fault, and some day we may be able to prove to your enemies that it wasn't."

"I hope so, Jack, but I've about given up," was the weary answer.

Jack had carefully kept from his father all the little worries that had occurred since the change in the pony express business had been made. He had said nothing about the misplaced planks of the bridge, nor about the two strangers.

"What's the use of worrying dad?" reflected our hero. "He has troubles enough of his own. I'll keep mine to myself."

That afternoon, late, as Jack was waiting at the Golden Crossing post office for the mail, a messenger rode in to say that the stage would be delayed because of a slight accident.

"But the driver wants you to wait," the mes-

senger told Jack, "as there are some important letters to go to Rainbow Ridge, and be forwarded from there on."

"All right, I'll wait," promised Jack.

"It will mean a night ride," suggested Jennie.

"I know it, but it can't be helped. It's part of the game. I'm not afraid."

But when Jack helped Jennie sort the mail a little later, and found among the letters and parcels some large envelopes addressed to Mr. Argent and sealed with red wax, a strange feeling came over him.

"Here are those answers," he thought. "These must be the important papers about the secret mine. And I've got to carry them through on a night ride. Well, I wish they hadn't come just at this time, but there's no help for it. I've got to take them through."

He paused for a moment, with the important letters in his hand.

"What are those?" asked Jennie.

"Oh just some stuff for our town," Jack answered, indifferently.

In a flash he had made up his mind not to tell his cousin of the value and importance of the mail that night. She would worry if she knew what he was carrying along the trail after dark.

And Jack had another plan. He realized that the enemies, or business rivals of Mr. Argent,

(call them what you will) might know of the arrival of the documents.

"They may try to get them away from me," reflected Jack. "Now, I've read somewhere that the best way to throw off suspicion is to make something important look unimportant. That's what I'm going to do."

There were a number of newspapers in the mail. While Jennie was out of the room a moment Jack opened one bundle of papers, folded the red-sealed letters up in one of the papers, put back the wrapper and tossed the package into the pouch he would carry over his saddle.

"There!" he thought. "That doesn't look like anything of value. If I am held up, the thieves will throw away the newspapers anyhow, and I can get them later. I think that's a pretty good scheme, myself."

An hour later Jack was on his way along the mountain trail. It was quite dark, for there was no moon. But Jack laughed and sang as he parted from Jennie. He pretended that his heart was light, though, truth to tell, he was a bit apprehensive.

"Maybe those fellows don't know that the letters have arrived, and, if they do, my newspaper stunt will fool 'em," he decided.

It was near the bridge where once he had so nearly had a serious accident that, as Jack was riding along, he heard a sudden command:

"Halt!"

"Go on, Sunger! Go on!" yelled Jack in his pony's ear, as he slapped the animal on the flank. Then Jack felt himself suddenly attacked, as some one rode up alongside him, and dealt him a blow on the head.

CHAPTER IX

IN BONDS

For a moment Jack was so overcome by dizziness and a faint, sick feeling, that he could do nothing. Everything seemed black before his eyes, a blackness not of night, but the blackness of a fainting fit.

The young express rider reeled in his saddle, but he kept his seat by a great effort. Then he fought back the growing faintness that was overcoming him.

"I mustn't give in! I mustn't given in!" he told himself fiercely, over and over again. "I mustn't give way! I won't! I've got to protect the valuable letters—the mail—the express."

Then, somehow, Jack's head cleared. He felt more able to hold himself back from that terrible black void. He straightened up in the saddle, and his vision was again normal.

In the darkness he could see several men, three at least, standing around him. These three were not mounted, though off to one side of the trail Jack could see several dark forms which he could

make out to be horses. Then he saw, as he turned in his saddle, a man behind him on a big horse. This man held something in his hand, and Jack guessed it was this individual who had struck him. All four of the men wore masks.

"What—what does this mean?" faltered Jack, though he could pretty well guess.

"Huh! Don't you know?" was the question shot back at him. He tried to distinguish the voice, but could not. It was the mounted man who had spoken.

"A hold-up, eh?" asked Jack, his tones faltering in spite of his effort to make them steady. That this should come to him in spite of his watchfulness was a bitter thing. And a robbery, of all time, when the valuable papers and letters expected by Mr. Argent were in the mail pouches, too! There was also some valuable express matter. Jack gritted his teeth in anger. Then his hand moved toward the pocket where he carried his weapon.

"No you don't!" was the sudden and fierce exclamation of the man on the horse beside him, and with a quick motion he caught hold of Jack's hand, and jerked it away. "Take his gun!" the man directed. "I'll hold him."

One of the dismounted men came up, and while the man on the big horse held Jack in a cruel grip, another of the robbers brought out the revolver

which Jack's father had given him to carry for protection. But it had afforded little of that in this instance.

The young rider tried in vain to pierce behind the masks, and ascertain the identity of those holding him up, but it was of no avail.

"What do you want? What's the game?" Jack asked, as the man let go of his wrist. The fellow, however, kept one hand on the bridle of the pony, so that there was no chance for Jack to make a sudden spurt to escape.

"The game is we want what you've got with you," said one of the men. "And you might as well admit that we're going to get it. You may be a pretty smart lad, or think you are, but I guess we've got you right now!"

"No, you've got me all wrong," Jack answered bitterly. "And while you were about it why didn't you bring a few more along. Four crooks seem hardly enough to hold up one pony express rider. Aren't you afraid I'll do something to you?"

He spoke lightly—sarcastically. He was fighting for time. Trying to think of some plan of escape. He even thought perhaps some one might come along to whom he could appeal for help. But there was as small a chance of that as there was of his being able to get away by his own efforts.

"I suppose you could have scared up half a dozen more like yourselves," he went on. "There are more outlaws in the mountains. Or, maybe, you have another force back on the trail, and another ahead here."

"Say, young feller, none of your fresh talk now!" cried one of the men, fiercely. "I won't stand it!"

"No, let's get it over with," remarked another.

At these words a chill of fear, such as he had not experienced before, seemed to flash over Jack. Did the men mean to harm him—put him to death, perhaps, to hide the living witness of their crime? He tried to be brave, but again came that faint feeling, and his head ached where he had been struck—ached cruelly.

"Yes, lets finish and get a move on," agreed the man on the horse. "Here, one of you take the pouches, and another hand me the ropes. I'll have him triced up in a jiffy."

Jack breathed more easily. He was only to be bound then, as the outlaws of the mountains usually did bind the stage drivers or express messengers whom they robbed. There seldom was a killing, unless the victims resisted or shot at the hold-up men.

One of the three unmounted men advanced to Jack, and began loosening the fastenings of the mail and express pouches.

"Don't touch them!" the pony rider cried. "Leave those mail sacks alone!"

So vehement was he, and so much energy did he put in his voice that, for the moment, the man was startled, and drew back.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"That is government property!" went on Jack, trying to follow up the impression he had made. "You are interfering with the United States' mail. And I don't need to tell you what sort of a crime that is! You won't have to deal with me, you'll have to answer to the government, and the inspectors will be on your trail inside of twenty-four hours! Don't you touch that mail!"

For a moment the men did seem impressed by Jack's sharp warning. Then the man on the horse laughed, and said:

"Oh, quit your talking. Go on, take the sacks and we'll get away. We can't stay here the rest of the night!"

"Say, he has a pretty lively tongue," observed the man who was loosening the sacks from Jack's saddle. "He gave me a start for a second or two."

"Forget it! Yank 'em off and come on."

Jack felt that it would be useless to protest further. Besides, there was a growing feeling of sickness and pain. The man took the express and

mail packages and tied them on one of the three horses.

"Now then get off, you pony rider!" ordered the man on the big horse. "Get off, and get off quick! We're in a hurry and we're done fooling!"

"What—what are you going to do?" faltered Jack. He was beginning to be afraid of what was to come.

"We're going to tie you up so tight that you won't get loose in a jiffy," was the answer he received. "You say the inspectors will be on our trail inside of twenty-four hours. Well, maybe they won't if you can't get loose to give the alarm. So we're going to tie you up."

"That won't prevent the alarm from being given," Jack said. "When I fail to arrive there'll be a search made, and they'll find me."

"That's right," Jack heard one of the unmounted men say in a low voice. "He's right about that."

"Oh, what of it?" impatiently asked the man on the horse. "Of course this thing is bound to be found out sooner or later. I expect that. But we can gain a little time by trussing him up with ropes. Now come on—be lively. Get off or I'll yank you off, and I won't be easy about it, either!"

Jack felt it best to obey. He leaped from the saddle, and then, with a sharp slap on the flank

of Sunger, he cried to his pony: "Go on, boy! Home!"

The intelligent animal sprang forward, and before any of the men could catch him had darted off down the dark trail in the diretcion of Rainbow Ridge.

"Look out—get him!" one of the men cried, sharply.

"What's the use—he's gone, and he's one of the fastest horses in the mountains; we'd never catch him," said the mounted man. "It was a sharp trick, lad, but it won't do you any good. Tie him up!"

Jack was handled roughly by the outlaws, and was soon so tightly bound that he felt he never could get loose without help. He once more tried to look behind one of the masks, but it was so dark that he could see nothing. He tried to get a mental picture of the shapes of the men and the tones of their voices, so he might know them again if he ever saw or heard them.

"Lay him over here, on one side of the road," ordered the man who seemed to be the leader. "Some one may be along before noon to-morrow and take care of you," he said to Jack, who did not answer. "If they don't we'll send an anonymous message, telling where you can be found. We don't want to hurt you, but we had to have this stuff from you, and this was the only way to

get it," the outlaw went on. "Come along, boys," he concluded.

Then the four men, taking with them the mail and express pouches, galloped away in the darkness.

CHAPTER X

A QUEER DISCOVERY

LEFT to himself, tied tightly with the ropes that cut into his wrists and made his legs ache, poor Jack lay in a sort of stupor. He could hardly understand what had happened, and his head hurt him very much where he had been struck. He was lying on the road at one side of the trail. Overhead he could see the stars twinkling. It was still very quiet.

"Not much chance of any one coming along the trail to-night," mused Jack. It was the first thought that had come clearly to him, and, in a measure, it served to rouse him from his stupor. Then his brain seemed to clear.

"I've got to do something! I can't lie here and wait for some one to come and help me!" he decided. Already there was more vigor in the activity of his mind.

Jack's first idea, as soon as he had begun to think clearly, was that he must loosen his bonds. To this end he writhed and struggled as he lay

on his back. He managed to roll over on his side, but he found himself more uncomfortable than in his first position, and soon rolled back to that.

During this operation he tried, by every means in his power, to stretch or strain the knots. He thought if he could only get one of the bonds to give he might manage to get one hand out.

"And if I can do that, I'll soon be clear," Jack reasoned. "But it isn't going to be easy to get one hand out."

It did not take him long to discover this. The robbers had done their work well. They were taking no chances. Jack rested after his struggles. His head ached worse than ever because of the rush of blood to it from the strain.

"I wonder if it will do any good to call?" he mused. "I'm going to try. But I've got to get my breath first."

A little later he began shouting and calling for help, doing it at intervals. But he had not much hope. He was on the lonesomest part of the trail, which, at best, was seldom traveled. Often days would pass without any one, save the pony express rider, going over the mountain.

"I might as well save my breath, I guess," reasoned Jack. "This is only playing me out. Maybe they'll come for me when Sunger gets home. Whoever sees him without me and the mail will know something has happened. The only trou-

ble is they won't know where to look. But it's my best chance, I think."

He lay quiet for a period, thinking over the momentous events that had just occurred.

"I wonder who those men were, and what they were after," mused Jack. "There wasn't enough valuable stuff in the express packages to make four men risk state's prison for it. It must have been the mail they were after. And nothing of great value was in the mail, except the letters for Mr. Argent. Of course, they were what they wanted. And in that case he ought to know who would be most interested in taking them. We may be able to arrest the men yet.

"But it may be too late," Jack reflected. "They may get the information they want and take the secret mine away from those to whom it belongs. That would be too bad! But if my plan only works, and those fellows don't open that bundle of papers, the letters may be safe yet. It was my best chance. If I could only get loose!"

Again Jack struggled and squirmed, but the ropes would not give an inch. Suddenly, as the young pony express rider was trying to work loose his bonds, he felt a sharp pain in one hand, which was under him, behind his back, pressing on the earth.

"Whew! Something cut me then!" Jack exclaimed. "Must be a knife one of the men

dropped. If I could only get at that and saw on a rope!"

Carefully he felt along on the ground, so as not to cut himself again. His fingers touched something sharp.

"A piece of glass—part of a broken bottle," he murmured. "Well, it may be as good as a knife, but I'll probably cut myself more in using it."

He managed to work himself down until he had a firm grip on the piece of glass under him—a grip that did not cut.

"Now let me figure this out," he mused.

It was obvious that he could not hold the piece of glass in his fingers and saw away at the ropes around his wrists. He could not bend his fingers back far enough.

"If I could only get the glass between my feet, I might be able to bend them back far enough, by lying on my face, so I could saw on the ropes that way," he reflected. He tried, but soon had to give it up. He also endeavored to do this by lying on his side, but it was of no use. Then, in a flash, it came to him.

"I'll bury the glass in the ground, to hold it," he told himself. "By leaving a sharp, jagged edge sticking out I ought to be able to saw through the ropes on my wrists, by rubbing the cords up and down against the glass. I'll do it!"

It was hard work, but by lying on his side Jack managed, after a fashion. He had to work without seeing what he was doing. Even daylight would not have helped him, for he could not see behind his back.

By using the glass as a sort of shovel, Jack managed to dig a hole in the earth. He then put the long piece of glass in this, upright, and packed dirt around it. His fingers came in contact with a small stone, and he used this to tamp the soil and gravel around the glass knife, to hold it more firmly upright. He cut himself several times while doing this, but he kept on.

Finally he was ready to make the attempt. It was more than an hour after he first began his operations, and he was weary, for he had to work in a cramped and uncomfortable position. He rested a few minutes, and then began sawing the rope around his wrists up and down on the sharp piece of glass stuck upright in the ground.

It had to be done slowly and gently, because too much pressure would have overturned the queer knife. Jack knew he must be patient. He cut his wrists more than once, but the gashes were slight, and he thought the bleeding would soon stop.

Finally he felt the bonds loosening slightly. Some of the rope strands were cut through.

It won't be long now," Jack thought, gladly.

Again and again on the jagged edge of the glass knife did he rub the cords, and finally, with a sudden spreading apart of his hands, he found he could break the remaining strands.

His hands were free!

Jack's heart beat high with hope now. He waited a few minutes to let the slackened circulation of blood take up its work. Then it was the work of but an instant, with the same piece of glass that had served him so well, to sever the ropes about his legs. But when Jack tried to stand up he nearly toppled over, so weak was he, and so numb were his legs. They had gone to sleep from the lack of circulation of the blood.

But in a little while he was all right, and could walk about.

"Now, the question is, what's the best thing to do?" he asked himself. "Make for home, as soon as I can, and give the alarm," he reasoned. "I've got to give the alarm, if Sunger hasn't already gotten there and given it for me."

Off on the dark and lonely trail he started. It was quite different from traveling over it on the back of his speedy pony. But it was something to be free, and free sooner than the robbers had any idea he would be.

"I may even be able to catch up to them, and trace which way they go," Jack thought.

He walked on for nearly an hour, when he

heard the trot of a number of horses some distance ahead of him. Jack halted and listened intently.

"I wonder if those are the hold-up men coming back, to make sure I'm still tied up, or if it's my friends?" thought Jack. "I can't afford to take a chance. I'll hide in the bushes until I see who they are."

He knew every inch of the trail. Near the spot where he was, was a hole in the side of the hill where some badly directed man had once started to dig a gold mine. He had not gone far before he discovered that iron pyrites was the only "gold" in that locality. The hole was never filled up, and was now almost hidden from sight by a heavy growth of underbrush.

"That's the place for me," Jack mused. A few strides took him to it, and he stepped in to await, in concealment, the passage of the oncoming horsemen.

Something soft and yielding came in contact with Jack's foot. He started, thinking he must have stepped on some sleeping beast. But there came no outcry, which would have followed in that case.

"It can't be dead leaves," mused the lad, "it doesn't feel that way. What—"

He stooped down and felt with his hands. A thrill ran through him.

"The mail pouches!" he exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. "The mail pouches the robbers took from me! They hid them here, and I've found them! What luck!"

CHAPTER XI

DUMMY LETTERS

JACK was so overjoyed at his queer and unexpected discovery that, for the moment, he forgot all about the approaching horsemen from whom he had hidden himself. Then there came a thought to him.

"Perhaps the pouches are empty! If the rascals have taken all the mail out and just thrown the empty pouches in here, that isn't such a great discovery after all!"

Once more he felt of the pouches in the darkness. He could tell that they were well filled—almost the same as when he had tied them to his saddle.

"I don't believe they opened them!" he exclaimed, half aloud. "They must have been frightened and thrown them in here, thinking to come back for them when they had the chance."

Then he had another idea.

"And that must be the robbers coming now!" he reasoned. "They're coming back to get the pouches. What shall I do?"

There was but one answer to that question—he must hide the mail and express matter in some other place. He paused a moment to listen. The galloping hoof-beats were nearer now, but it would still be some time before the riders would be opposite the old mine hole. The trail wound in and out at this point, and while sounds came up plainly through the rarefied mountain air, bodies themselves could not travel so swiftly.

"I've got five minutes, anyhow," reasoned Jack.

He caught up the mail pouches, one in either hand, though his cut fingers and wrists hurt him cruelly. But he gritted his teeth and kept on. He knew the ground well. Back of the hole was a slope that extended to a deep patch of woods. Jack would hide himself and the mail in there.

He was too excited to notice whether or not the locks on the bags had been tampered with. In fact he could not see in the dark and he had no time for extended investigation. He just tucked the bags under his arms, and ran with them. That is he made as good time as was possible under the circumstances. The ground was rough, and Jack himself was very weak. He had suffered much that night.

He found a good hiding place down in between two big logs, and there he stuffed the mail bags, covering them over with dried leaves. Then he

hurried back to the hole to get the express stuff.

Fortunately that was light, this trip, and he could easily carry the few small parcels that had been entrusted to him. In fact, in those days, only light packages were accepted by the pony riders. The mail was their chief concern.

So Jack had no trouble in carrying the sacks of express matter to their new hiding place. This done he had only to watch to see who the approaching riders might be.

Jack worked quickly, and when he had taken the last of his recovered stuff to the place between the two logs he sat down in such a position that he had a view of the trail. It was getting lighter now, for the dawn was at hand. There was a faint glow in the east.

"Well, I certainly have put in a night of it!" Jack thought. "And I may be in for more if these are the robbers coming back. They may look for their stuff, and make a search if they find it missing. But I don't believe they'll find me."

Nearer came the approaching hoof-beats. Jack peered from his hiding place. He could hear voices now, but the sound was uncertain. It would not do to call out. He must see who it was that was coming.

Suddenly several men rode into view. Jack counted their heads as they were outlined against the faintly-glowing eastern sky. There were

seven of them. Unless the robbers had come back reinforced these must be members of a searching party looking for the pony express rider. Yet Jack would take no chances. He must be certain.

"Hello, Jack! Jack Bailey! Pony Express! Where are you?"

This was the cry that echoed on the dying night.

Now there was no doubt of it!

Jack leaped to his feet.

"Here I am!" he cried. "Be with you in a second! Send some one up to help me carry down the mail!"

He was wildly excited, but he managed to calm himself long enough to light a match, and ignite a piece of bark. He wanted to indicate his position to the rescuers. They saw the flare and some one cried:

"All right, Jack! Be with you in a minute! Are you all right?"

It was the voice of Dr. Brown.

"Yes, I'm all right. It was a hold-up," Jack explained. "But I have the mail and express stuff back—that is I hope I have it all," he added.

Another moment and he was surrounded by his friends. There were Jed Monty, the stage driver, Dr. Brown, Amos Perkfeld, the president of the express company, Payson Wayde and Mr.

Argent, besides Henry Applebaugh, the hotel keeper, and one of his stable boys.

"Are you all right, Jack?" Dr. Brown repeated. "Your father insisted that I come out and help look for you."

"Yes, I'm all right. Just cut a little, where I sawed off the ropes on a piece of jagged glass. But does my father know?"

"Yes, your pony came galloping up to the Watson house, all lathered up, with you and the mail missing. We knew right away something had happened, after Mr. Watson came rushing into town with the news. So we organized a searching party at once. But what happened to you?"

Jack told everything, down to his unexpected finding of the mail, and his hiding from the anticipated robbers.

"And so you got everything back!" exclaimed Mr. Perkfield. "Well, I call that luck! Of course neither the government nor I could blame you for being robbed, but it is good to get it all back."

"And did my pony get home safe?" asked Jack eagerly. Sunger meant much to him.

"He's all right," said the hotel keeper. "I had one of my boys look after him. He's a bit winded, that's all. Smart little horse, that! If ever you want to sell him, Jack—"

"You needn't ask. I don't," was the quick an-

swer. "But what about my father, Dr. Brown? Is he worrying, much?"

"Well, some, of course, Jack. But I gave him some quieting medicine, and he'll soon hear the good news. He's much better these last few days."

The men questioned Jack at length about the appearance of the hold-up men, but he could not give a very clear description. No one recognized them as any one they knew.

"But we'll get a posse out after them as soon as we get back to town," declared Mr. Perkfeld. "We'll show them they can't hold up the pony express and get away with it."

"They didn't get away with it—that's the joke," said Mr. Argent. "I guess Jack is right. They probably feared pursuit, or might have gotten an alarm, so they dumped the stuff in the old mine hole and rode away, intending to come back later. Only Jack got ahead of them."

"That is I hope I did," interposed the pony express rider. "Maybe they have looted the bags, though they feel as full as when I took them from Golden Crossing."

"Well, we can soon tell," replied Mr. Argent. "It's getting light enough to see. The locks have been forced, anyhow, so it isn't any crime for us to open the United States' mail under these circumstances."

Jack and his rescuers gathered around while

the miner opened the bags. They were filled with letters, papers and small parcels.

"There was some stuff for you, Mr. Argent," said Jack. "It was the matter you were expecting, I think."

"Yes," assented the miner.

"I think I played a trick on the robbers," Jack went on. "At least I fixed up a trick, whether it worked or not we'll have to see now. I put your stuff inside a roll of newspapers thinking they wouldn't look there."

"Good plan," said the miner. "I get your idea. But some of the bundles of papers have been opened. Maybe the hold-up men thought they would find something to eat inside."

Jack's heart fell at these words. If the robbers had opened the packages of newspapers it must have been because they expected to find something hidden in one of them. And the only thing that was hidden was the parcel of valuable letters.

"They evidently opened the bags, looked through the contents, and, after putting the stuff back in them, hid the pouches in the hole," said Mr. Argent, as he picked up and looked at several packages of newspapers.

"That's the one I wrapped your stuff in, Mr. Argent," said Jack, pointing to one newspaper packet. "But—but it's been opened!" he cried,

as he saw, in the fast-coming morning light, what had happened.

"Yes, it's been opened," the miner agreed. His voice seemed strangely calm and collected.

"Are—are the letters gone?" faltered Jack.

"Well, they don't seem to be here," went on the miner, while the others looked on, somewhat at a loss what to make of the little scene. "No, there's nothing here belonging to me, Jack. Are you sure you put the sealed stuff inside this bundle of papers?"

"I'm positive!" Jack answered. "I remember it very well. It was the only bundle of papers with that kind of a wrapper."

For a moment there was a silence in the group.

"Well, they are gone," Mr. Argent went on.

Once more Jack wondered at the peculiar manner in which the miner spoke.

"I—I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Argent," said Jack, brokenly. "I thought I was doing the best thing to put the letters inside a newspaper bundle. I figured that the thieves would pass that over as of no importance. I had read of such things being done.

"But I guessed wrong. They must have been looking for the things you expected. They must have been on the watch, and were waiting for me to hold me up. I'm awfully sorry!"

Jack thought of the suspicion that had been

directed against his father because the contents of a letter entrusted to him had been made public. Now the son had failed in a trust. It was no excuse to say it could not be helped. The valuable letters were gone, and that alone mattered now. Jack saw himself disgraced, and the pony express route ridden by some one else.

"I'm—I'm awfully sorry," he said again.

"Oh, you needn't be!" exclaimed Mr. Argent, and he was actually laughing. "You needn't be."

"Needn't be! What—what do you mean?" gasped Jack.

"Why I mean that those robbers have had their trouble for their pains! Those letters were only a dummy set, sent through the mail to throw them off the scent. They contained information of absolutely no value. I thought there might be a hold-up, Jack, though I could not tell when it would occur. So I had my friends send me back a dummy set of letters. It was those useless documents which the hold-up men took. The real letters will come through later. It's a joke on those outlaws all right," and again Mr. Argent chuckled.

CHAPTER XII

A RIDE FOR LIFE

JACK BAILEY did not know what to do or say. He just stood there in the morning light, gazing at Mr. Argent, as though to make sure of the miner's words. Finally he faltered:

"Do you really mean it?"

"Mean it? Of course I do!" was the answer. "It's a joke on those rascals. They've had all their trouble for their pains. They've gone off with a set of dummy letters, plans and other mining information that will take them several weeks to digest. And they'll waste a lot of time trying to locate the claim. Only they'll be from fifty to a hundred miles from it. Oh, they'll be fooled all right!"

Jack experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling. He swayed and seemed about to fall. Dr. Brown caught him.

"Hold on! This won't do!" the physician exclaimed. "We must get him home. Why he's hurt!" he cried, as he saw the blood on Jack's hands.

"It's just some cuts—from the glass I sawed the rope on," the lad murmured. Already his strength was coming back to him. He was so glad the robbers had not obtained the real letters. It was a clever ruse on the part of the miner.

There was a spring not far from the place where Jack had recovered the mail bags, and he was given some water from this. His cuts were also washed and attended to by Dr. Brown. Then on a spare horse that had been brought along Jack rode back to Rainbow Ridge, one of the men carrying the mail and express stuff.

There was considerable excitement in town when the cavalcade returned. Already preparations were under way for the organization of a posse to hunt the robbers, and if necessary, scour the country for Jack.

But he had been found, and the mail and express matter, except the decoy letters, recovered. So the only thing left to do was to set out after the unscrupulous men who had attacked Jack.

There was little chance that they would be apprehended, however. They had a start of several hours, and probably had good horses.

"Besides," said Mr. Argent, "they will very likely head for the supposed location of the mine. It will take them out of this immediate neighborhood," he chuckled.

"And for a good while, I hope," said Mr. Perkfeld.

"Oh yes, it will take them a few weeks to find out they've been fooled," the miner said. "But then they may come back again."

"If they do we'll arrest 'em!" declared Jed Monty, cracking his stage whip.

As had been expected, the posse could get little trace of the hold-up men. They had disappeared after having cast aside the rifled mail pouches. It developed, however, that a few pieces of registered matter, and some express stuff had been taken, in addition to the bogus letters. The stolen stuff was jewelry, and there was not much chance that it would be recovered. Those to whom it was consigned would have to stand the loss.

But when it was considered that nearly all the valuable mail had come through safe, or rather, had been recovered, and that Mr. Argent's real letters were still safe, every one said it was a very lucky outcome indeed.

Jack's cuts did not amount to much, and he wanted to ride the route the next day after his experience, but Dr. Brown and his father would not let him. So a substitute was provided, furnishing his own horse, for Jack said Sunger was too tired to be used without some rest. The pony had made the trip alone, over the trail, and

it was his appearance at the Watson home which had led to the alarm.

A good rest, and the knowledge that nothing really serious had happened, did much to restore Jack, and on the second day following his experience he was back in the saddle again. His cuts had been well bandaged, so he could use his hands. He was not actually required to ride the express route, but he would not let any one else do it.

"Maybe I'll get a chance to trace those robbers," he said. "I feel sure I would know at least one of them again—the man who sat on his horse all the while. I'm going to be on the watch for him."

The excitement caused by the hold-up of the pony express soon died away. In western communities there is so much going on that interest is soon shifted to newer events.

The posse that went out to seek the robbers had no luck in finding them. All traces seemed to disappear after the bags were found in the old mine-hole. A man was kept in hiding at that place for nearly a week, ready to give the alarm if the hold-up men returned to get the pouches which they had hidden. But they did not come back.

Meanwhile Jack soon became himself again. His father, too, improved slowly, though he was

far from well, and would not be able to ride the trail again for a long time.

Of course, Jennie had to hear the whole story of the hold-up from Jack himself, and she sympathized deeply with him.

"Oh, it was just terrible!" she exclaimed, in her impulsive, but sweet and girlish fashion. "I just can't bear to think of your lying out there all alone, in the dark, and tied up with ropes!"

"Well, it wasn't exactly a picnic," Jack admitted.

"And to think of your cutting yourself on the glass!" she went on, as she looked at his hands, one of which she held gently.

"Oh, it might have been worse. If it hadn't been for the glass I might have lain there a while longer, and in that case I probably would not have found the stolen mail bags, for if I had waited there until the rescuers came I'd never have walked down the trail."

"Perhaps it was all for the best," Jennie admitted. "But I do hope nothing like that happens again."

"Same here!" exclaimed Jack. "Now have you the mail ready?"

And then, for a time, it was business.

For two weeks or more Jack rode the trail, back and forth, carrying the mail and the pony express matter. He was not again disturbed,

and Mr. Perkfeld gave orders that, except in case of great necessity, he shold not make night trips.

Nothing more was seen of the hold-up men, and Mr. Argent heard no news concerning his mining business. Whether or not those who had taken the bogus letters tried to locate the rich claim was not disclosed.

"But the real letters will come along some day—any day now—Jack," the miner said. "And when they do—"

"When they do no one shall get them away from me!" Jack exclaimed, and he was not boasting. He meant it. And you shall see how he kept his promise.

Several more attempts were made on the part of those who wanted Jack's place to supplant him as pony express rider. But he had made himself a favorite with the stage drivers, as well as with Mr. Perkfeld, who said Jack could keep on riding the trail until his father was ready to resume his duties. Several mean little things occurred, which, like the loose planks in the bridge, Jack felt were designed to make trouble for him. But he avoided them, fortunately, and none was as serious as the bridge incident. The author of that remained a mystery, though Jack had his suspicions.

Jake Tantrell continued to sneer at our hero.

He made several efforts to get Jack's place, even offering to do the work for less money, but his offer was not accepted.

Then came an unpleasant season, when the fall rains set in. The sun seemed to have forgotten how to shine, and Jack fairly lived in his poncho, or big rubber riding blanket that went over his head, protecting him and the mail bags.

"How's the Ponto river, Jack?" asked his father one day, when the lad had stopped to speak to the invalid. "Is she rising much with all this water that's falling?"

"Yes, she's getting pretty high, Dad."

"Look out for the bridge there. It isn't any too strong, and it may go out with the high water."

"Oh, I'm not worrying about that. They've strengthened it within these last two weeks, and I guess it will hold. Still the water is high in the mountains. There's some talk of the Richfield dam not holding."

"Is that so? Well, if that goes out the folks down below will get a wetting."

"That's what they will! But it may hold until it stops raining."

The Richfield dam was a new one, built above the small settlement of that name on the flats about three miles to the northeast of the Ponto river. The Richfield river was a branch of the

latter, and was a turbulent stream, often rising rapidly, for it was confined between steep, high banks.

Jack had his talk with his father vividly recalled to his mind two nights later. It was the first time since the hold-up that he had been obliged to ride at night, but there was some valuable mail that had been delayed, and that must be put through.

The pony express lad was on his trip toward Rainbow Ridge from Golden Crossing, and it was dark when he reached the point where the Richfield river branched off from the Ponto. And at the sight which met his eyes the lad exclaimed:

"Say, this is certainly high water! I wonder if the dam is holding."

It had rained hard all day. Now it was but drizzling.

"I'm going to take a run down there," Jack decided. "It won't take me ten minutes, and you can easily make that up; can't you Sunger?"

The pony whinnied in answer.

"I've time enough, anyhow," Jack went on. "I'll just go and take a look at the dam. The water must be two feet over it now."

He turned off the main trail, and was soon approaching the dam. Before he reached it he could hear the sullen roar of the pent-up water.

And when he had a view of the impounded flood he saw at once that it had approached the danger point.

Jack looked critically at the dam. He knew something about such structures, and about high water.

"I don't believe that dam will last," he argued. "There's too much water pressure on it." Even as Jack spoke a small portion of the dam, near its juncture with the shore, gave way, and a large volume of water rushed out.

"That's the start!" cried the pony rider. "She'll all go in half an hour. I've got to ride down below and warn the Richfield people. Otherwise they'll be swept away. I've got to ride and warn them!"

There was nothing else to do. Jack called to his faithful pony and guided him into the trail that led to Richfield on the flats below. If that volume of water were suddenly to be released through the breaking of the dam, part of the village would be wiped out. If they were warned in time the populace in the danger zone could take to the hills on either side and escape.

"Come on, boy!" called Jack to his pony. "It's a ride for life all right!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE INSPECTOR

Down the rocky slope, toward the little settlement on the flats below the dam, rode Jack. He thought rapidly. If he could beat the flood, there would be time to warn the sleeping population so they could flee to the hills. There were not many who had their homes in the danger zone, not more than twenty-five families.

"I'll wake some of 'em up," Jack reflected, "and then they can warn the others. I don't imagine they'll have time to save anything. Too bad! But that dam is certainly going."

The rain came pelting down once more, the drops stinging in Jack's face. He tried to listen, to ascertain if he could hear the roar of the waters that would indicate that the dam had already gone out, but all he could catch was the splash of the rain.

Jack's course was along the now turbulent stream that was formed from the overflow of the pent-up waters. In normal times this was but a mere brook, most of the waters being led off

through a pipe line to supply a distant irrigation scheme. But now there was so much water that not only was the pipe line filled, but the overflow from the dam had turned the brook into a river.

"The people ought to have seen the danger, and gotten out before this," reflected Jack, "but perhaps they haven't. Well, I'll do my best to save 'em!"

On galloped the faithful pony. Jack wished he could put the mail and express stuff somewhere until he could conclude his ride for life, but it would not be safe to leave it anywhere. Fortunately, he had not much of a load that night.

To Jack it seemed that he never would reach the little town, nor see the lights of the first cabin loom into sight.

"That is there'll be lights if the folks are up," mused Jack, "and I hope some of them are. There'll be some tall scrambling if I have to get 'em all up out of bed."

The rain was a perfect torrent now, and the lad realized that, with all this additional water falling into the reservoir, and with what it would receive from the swollen mountain streams flowing into it, the dam would be further endangered.

The pony slipped and almost fell as he went around a bad turn, where the trail was filled with rocks.

"Look out there, Sunger!" Jack cautioned

him, as he pulled up the faithful animal. "This is no time to fall!"

But Sunger recovered himself, and galloped on.

Suddenly a light flashed into view, then another.

"A house!" exclaimed Jack. "The first one. Now for the alarm!"

He rode up to the door, glad in his heart that the light was burning.

"Though that doesn't indicate that they're awake," the lad mused.

He pounded on the door, not getting out of the saddle.

"Get up! Get up!" he cried. "The dam will give way in a moment! Get up, and help give the alarm!"

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the patter of the rain.

"Hurry! Hurry!" Jack cried, again pounding on the portal.

This time he heard, after a wait of a few seconds, some one moving in the house, then a sleepy voice demanded:

"What is it? What's the matter? Who's there?"

"Never mind who I am!" Jack replied. "It's the pony express rider, between Golden Crossing and Rainbow Ridge, if you have to

know. But the dam is giving way! It may have gone out now! There'll be the biggest kind of flood on these flats in half an hour! Get up! Take to the hills!"

The door was thrown open, revealing a man wrapped in a blanket. He seemed just to have gotten up out of bed.

"What's that?" he inquired, sleepily.

Jack repeated his warning. The man understood now. He rushed back in to the room.

"Come on, 'Mandy!" he yelled. "Git the children! Hustle into what clothes you can! We've got to skip! The dam is going out! Quick now!"

"Warn the others nearest you!" Jack cried, as he turned Sunger away from the house. "I'm going to ride on down below and give the alarm."

"I will!" the man answered. "You've probably saved our lives!"

A woman could be heard crying, and children were screaming in fear within the house, but Jack could not stay for that. There were others to warn.

On he rode, going past without pause the few houses near that of the man he had first called. Jack depended on him to give the alarm to his neighbors.

But the lad called at other cabins, repeating his warning. Some folk he had difficulty in arous-

ing, but the news soon spread, and in a short time the whole settlement was on the alert.

As Jack knocked on the door of the last house, farthest removed from the upper end of the settlement, he heard far off a dull boom like the reverberation of an explosion.

"There goes the dam!" cried Jack. "Now the flood will come!"

But the people had been warned in time. They had no chance to save anything save their most easily-carried belongings, and with these they fled to high ground.

The noise Jack had heard was the breaking of the dam, and a little later a great wall of water swept down the narrow valley. It carried everything before it, sweeping away the frail cabins in its path. But there was no loss of human life, thanks to the brave pony rider.

Jack wished he could stay and help the unfortunates, but he had other duties. And, anyway, the residents on the higher ground, who were in no danger, came to the relief of their neighbors. Houses were thrown open to those whose homes had been swept away, and the refugees were given clothing, food and shetler.

The flood did not last long, for the reservoir was soon emptied. But in that short time it did great damage; that is comparatively great, for the cabins were mostly those of poor persons.

The mass of water gradually subsided, though the heavy rains had made a river of the mountain brook, and it was several days before it went back to its normal level. Then the work of repairing the damage of the flood was taken up.

When Jack saw, that night, that he had done all he could, he turned back on the trail, for the mail must not be delayed longer than could be helped, and already nearly three hours had been lost.

It was almost morning when he rode into Rainbow Ridge with the first news of the burst dam. He made light of his own part in the affair, but that came out later, and much honor was paid the lad. He bore his honors modestly, however, and the greatest praise—or what he considered such—was when his father said:

"I'm proud of you, Jack, my boy!"

Relief for the unfortunate flood victims was sent both from Rainbow Ridge and Golden Crossing, and when Jennie heard of the disaster she insisted on doing up some of her own clothing and forwarding it to some of the girls who had lost theirs.

Every one helped, as is always the case at a time like that, and though many families lost everything, still there was no mourning for lives that never could be given back. Jack had provided against that by his brave ride.

It was two weeks after the flood, and now the mountains were calm and peaceful again. The long season of rain had passed, and the weather was glorious. Jack enjoyed every moment of it as he rode the trail.

"It certainly is a great life!" he reflected. "I'm glad the way is so rough, otherwise they'd be wanting me to use a motor-cycle or an automobile. But none of them for me, while I have you, Sunger!"

The pony whinnied his answer, as Jack patted him on the neck.

"Well, anything big to-day, Jennie?" he asked, as he rode up to the Golden Crossing office one afternoon. "Anything important? Why, what's the matter?" he asked in some concern. "You look worried."

"I am, Jack," she said, and she did not answer his smile.

"What about? Your mother isn't ill; is she? You haven't lost any registered letters?"

"No, it isn't that, but a post office inspector has been here, asking me a lot of questions. He intimated that things weren't being done right, and he's coming back in an hour to check up my accounts."

"Well, I suppose they have to do what they're hired for. Was he mean or ugly?"

"No, but he seemed terribly in earnest. And

suppose my accounts aren't exactly right? I may have made little mistakes. Then he'll report me and I'll lose my office. Oh, Jack, I couldn't bear that!"

"Don't worry," Jack soothed her. "I'll stay and have a talk with this inspector. Maybe I can help straighten matters out, if they're a bit wrong. You say he is coming back in an hour?"

"Yes, and the time is nearly up. There he is now."

Jack looked out, and a strange feeling came over him as he saw a large man, on an unusually high horse riding up to the post office.

"Is he the inspector?" asked the pony rider.

"Yes," Jennie answered.

Jack shut his teeth grimly, and a strange look came over his face.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CHASE

"Oh, Jack, what shall I do?" asked Jennie. She was trembling, and seemed much alarmed.

"Do? Why you don't have to do anything," the pony express rider answered. "Let this inspector ask his questions, and then we'll see what course to take."

"Oh, but suppose he finds something wrong—not the proper amount of stamps on hand—I can't be sure I counted them right."

"Say, little girl, don't you worry!" Jack went on. "I don't believe this fellow will do much questioning."

"Why, Jack, what makes you talk that way? He's a government inspector. He told me so! Do you know him?"

"I rather think I do, but I'm not sure," Jack answered. Again there was a grim shutting of his lips, and a determined look came into his eyes. "I want to hear him speak first," the lad said. "Then I can tell better."

The inspector, if such he were, had stopped outside the post office to light a cigar. He sat easily on his big horse, and Jack could not help admiring the noble animal. The man himself was a fine physical specimen, but he had a hard, cruel face, and shifty eyes. There was no one in the immediate vicinity of the post office at that time, for Jack had delivered the mail an hour before, and he had sauntered back to the office, after doing some errands about town, to have a talk with Jennie. The other mail would not arrive for another hour, so there was no excuse for the gathering of the crowd which always awaited the incoming mail.

Having lighted his cigar, the man again advanced slowly. He looked all about, Jack thought, to see if he was likely to be interfered with, but this may not have been so.

He dismounted with easy grace, and tied his horse to a post in front of the office. Then he sauntered in. Jack sat down in a chair behind a door, out of sight. He did not want the inspector to see him until the right moment.

"Well, Miss—er—Blake, I believe you said your name was," began the man, and his tone was insolent, "I suppose you are ready to have me go over your accounts now?"

Jack started at the sound of his voice.

"That's the fellow—I'm positive of it!" he

thought. "Now I've got him—got one of them, anyhow! Oh, this is luck!"

Jack's eyes gleamed.

Jennie hardly knew what to make of the situation. She half expected Jack to do something, or say something, to help her.

Still she was postmistress, and only she was qualified to answer the official questions. But if something was wrong?

"Well, then maybe Jack will help me out," she thought. She was trembling and was much upset. It was the first time an inspector had called at her little office.

"Now, I want to see the records of the registered mail, going and coming, Miss Blake. I also must check over your stamps and cash. Have you had in, lately, any special delivery stuff?"

"Why, yes—that is—Oh, I hardly know where to begin," said the flustered girl, wishing Jack would say something. "You see I've never been inspected before."

"Humph!" sneered the man. "You act as though something was wrong. Most offices where I go don't have such nervous persons in charge. If everything is all right you have nothing to fear. Perhaps you had better step outside and let me go over matters myself. That would be better, and you wouldn't be so nervous.

"If everything is all right you have nothing

to fear, and if there is something wrong, well, I'll be as easy in my report to Washington as I can. I won't make it too hard for you. Yes, I think that will be best. Just leave the office to me for a little while."

Jennie flashed, over the man's head, a look at Jack in the corner behind the door. The young pony express rider had arisen, and, to her alarm, Jennie saw his hand go toward the pocket where she knew he carried his revolver—a new one since the robbers had taken his first one.

Jennie wanted to scream.

"Just run along, little girl, and let me have the place to myself," the man urged.

It was time for Jack to act.

He fairly sprang out from behind the door and confronted the man.

"Are you sure," Jack asked, "that if she left the post office to you that you wouldn't run off with it?"

The man started back. He turned a little pale, and then a flood of red surged into his face. He seemed to recover himself with an effort.

"I—I don't know what you mean. Who are you?" he demanded, curtly.

"Never mind who I am, but who are you?" and Jack fairly shot out the words.

"Why, I'm the post office inspector for this district," was the answer, and again the man's

tone was sneering. "Are you connected with the department, if I may ask?"

"I am," said Jack, grimly.

"In what capacity?"

"Pony express rider!" shot out Jack. "The same pony express rider that you and your gang of outlaws held up not long ago! I know you now. I was sure of you the minute I set eyes on you on that big horse, and when I heard your voice I was doubly sure. Wearing your mask didn't help any. I know you! You're no more a post office inspector than I am. You're a post office robber, that's what you are!"

The man started to speak, but stopped suddenly. As Jack was about to draw his weapon to order the man to submit, the fellow with a sudden leap was out of the place. In another instant he had jumped to the back of his horse, yanking loose the tie rope as he leaned over the saddle. Then with a clatter of hoofs he was off.

Jennie screamed, but Jack, flashing past her to get outside, yelled:

"Stop him! Get after him! He's one of the fellows who held up the mail, and robbed me! Stop him!"

Jack fired in the air to attract attention, for the neighborhood was deserted. He could not bring himself to fire at the man, nor even at the splendid horse. Though the provocation

was great, and though Jack would have been justified, he could not do it.

"Stop him! He's a post office robber!" Jack yelled, again firing a shot. Then, leaping on the back of his pony which was waiting for him outside the building, Jack gave chase after the escaping outlaw.

"We've got to get him, Sunger!" he cried. "We've got to get him!"

CHAPTER XV

A CAUTION

SHOTS always attract attention, especially in a western community where they usually mean something. In cities there are so many noises constantly being heard, and back-fires and tire blow-outs from automobiles so nearly resemble the discharge of firearms, that if a revolver actually were to be fired in a crowded street it is hardly likely that it would attract notice.

But in the quiet little western town of Golden Crossing shots were rather a novelty. The place was peaceful and law-abiding, and, as was said, when pistol reports were heard, there usually was some good reason for them.

In consequence, when Jack shot off his revolver, it was not long before the main street in front of the post office was thronged.

Men came rushing out of stores and houses, and there appeared also not a few women and children. Jack, racing down the street after the escaping outlaw, looked back and saw that he was able to call for reinforcements. One man

had already jumped on his horse and was joining in the chase.

"What's the row?"

"It's one of the men who held me up!" exclaimed Jack in answer.

"We'll get him!" was yelled back, and several more men hurried to loosen the tie-straps of their horses to lend their aid.

"I don't know whether we'll get him or not," Jack mused, as he urged his pony on. "He's got a good start of us, and that horse of his can go some, or I miss my guess. Besides, he's a regular ox, and can keep going for hours at a time.

"You're all right, Sunger, and there isn't a better pony living," Jack went on, "but it's like putting a little runabout auto up against a big racing car. It isn't equal. Still we'll do our best."

Several men were now taking part in the chase. The first one who had heard what Jack said had passed the word to the others, and the posse, so hastily organized, understood what sort of man they were after.

Some of the men were miners, and others were rough characters—that is rough in the sense that they lived in the open and were ready for whatever came along. Some of them began firing their "guns," as they called their revolvers, but there was no chance of hitting the fleeing man, as

he was now out of sight beyond a turn in the trail. Realizing this the men fired in the air, hoping, perhaps, that the sound of the shots would intimidate the fellow, and cause him to stop.

But the man ahead was made of as stern and as desperate stuff as were the majority of his pursuers. He must have known that Jack had recognized him, and he realized the penalty if he were caught. So he made up his mind that he would not be taken.

Jack was the nearest to him, and as the pony express rider caught occasional glimpses of the fellow, he saw him beating his horse to urge the magnificent animal to still greater speed.

"There's no use trying to catch him," thought Jack, "he's got too much of a start, and his horse can beat anything around here. I guess he knows that."

Still Jack would not have given up had not something occurred that made it absolutely certain that the chase was useless.

Coming to a bit of soft ground Sunger stumbled and fell, throwing Jack cleanly over his head. Fortunately the lad landed on a bank of thick ferns, so that his fall only jarred him. The pony was not hurt, and soon scrambled to his feet and looked at his owner, Jack imagined, with a sort of apologetic expression.

"I know you couldn't help it, Sunger, old boy," the lad said. "It wasn't your fault.

He limped toward his steed and patted him. Then Jack saw that one of his saddle girths had broken. With that unmended it would be useless to try to continue the pursuit. The saddle would slip from under him, and bareback riding on the mountain trail is out of the question.

Jack realized this, and when the first of the posse came up it was decided to abandon the pursuit for the time being.

"We can't get him now, but maybe we can trail him later," said Jack. "There's no use in my going on."

"No. And you'll be needed to carry the mail," a man replied. "The stage will be in soon. You'd better get back. Some of us will plan to follow the fellow. We can ask along the way, and maybe get trace of him. If so, we'll let you know."

One or two of the pursuers who had no special duties to take them back to the town agreed to follow the trail of the pursued one for some distance further. The others went back with Jack, temporary mending having been done to the saddle girth.

"Well, he got away, Jennie," said Jack, regretfully, as he entered the post office again.

"I'm glad of it!" she exclaimed impulsively.

"What!" he cried.

"I mean for your sake," she added. "He might have shot you, Jack!"

"Oh, thanks for your care," he laughed. "But I wish we could have gotten him. It would be a big feather in my cap."

"I don't care for caps with feathers," Jennie retorted. "But what in the world do you suppose he wanted, Jack? And why did he pass himself off as a post office inspector?"

"So he could have a chance to look over your records. And he may have thought there was something of value in the waiting mail that he could take away with him, if he got you out of the place.

"That was his game. You see the gang of outlaws didn't even make what might be called expenses out of their hold-up of me. They had their trouble for their pains, and I suppose they were wild when they found out the valuable letters they took were only dummies.

"Probably the fellow thought the real letters might be coming along soon now, and he wanted to get them. I guess he must be the head one of the crowd that is trying to get control of the secret mine Mr. Argent is going to work. Those fellows are desperate. But this one didn't get anything."

"He came near it, though," Jennie said.

"Only for you I suppose I would have been foolish enough to go out and leave him in the office alone. There wasn't much he could take, however. But I did get a new supply of stamps yesterday, nearly fifty dollars' worth. If he had taken them—"

"He wasn't looking for any such small change as stamps," said Jack. "I know what he was after—it was the real Argent letters. Well, he got away from us, more's the pity, though the men may overhaul him later. Now I've got to get ready for the back trip."

But Jack did not have to make it that night. The incoming mail was late and as there was nothing of importance to go through, Jack followed the previous instructions he had received and remained in Golden Crossing.

He was glad he did not have to take the night ride. His pony was quite shaken up by the fall, and a little lame. Jack himself felt sore and stiff, and it was much pleasanter to remain with his relatives, spending the evening in Jennie's company, than to ride the lonely mountain trail after dark.

Late that night the men who had kept on with the pursuit came back to report that they had lost the trail of the man they were after. He had made good his escape, at least for the time being.

"But we'll get him yet!" some of them boasted.

"They won't if he gets a start on that horse of his," thought Jack.

When Jack made his appearance at the Mansion Hotel the next morning to deliver the mail, and take that which was to go back to Golden Crossing, the pony express rider was met by Mr. Argent.

"Just a word with you, Jack," said the miner. "You remember the bogus letters that were taken away from you, I suppose?"

"I should say I did!" Jack exclaimed. "Why, have they found them?"

"No. But it doesn't matter about them. I want to tell you now that the real papers and letters—the ones that contain the information about the mine—may be along any day or night now. And I want to ask you to be specially careful about them."

"I will, Mr. Argent."

"I know you will, Jack, but I want to caution you, not only about them, but about your own safety. There are a number of desperate men who would go almost any length to get posesssion of that package of documents. So be on your guard."

Mr. Argent suddenly ceased speaking and looked around. They were out in front of the hotel, near a clump of bushes. Without saying anything further Mr. Argent suddenly made a leap behind the shrubbery.

CHAPTER XVI

SUNGER GOES LAME

JACK was on the alert, ready to follow, but there was no need. Mr. Argent came back with a grim smile on his bronzed face.

"I thought I heard a movement there, as if some one were listening," he said, "but it was a false alarm."

"Are they trailing you as closely as that?"

"Yes, and more so," was the answer. "There's a big fight on to get this mine away from me and my friends, but we're going to beat our enemies. They'd give anything to get the information that is to come to me through the mail, and that's why I'm always on the lookout, fearing some one may overhear what I say."

"But I thought you knew where the mine is," said Jack.

"So I do, and I'm one of the very few men who do know the exact location."

"Then why are you expecting information through the mail that will disclose the place where it is?"

"You don't exactly understand," was the reply.

"You see after the man who first located the mine came back with some rich samples of gold from it, he died, and the place where he had made the strike was lost for some time. Then the documents giving the location were found by those entitled to share the wealth, and I came in on the deal.

"Now, in order to have everything perfectly legal it was necessary, in this particular case, to send to the authorities to have our titles made good. To do that we had to describe exactly where the mine was located. We had to send this information to the government officials in San Francisco. But of course our secret is safe with them.

"The trouble is, however, that they are now sending back to us our original documents, which give the location of the mine, and with them come our proofs to the claim, our legal title so to speak. Of course all these papers contain the written description of the location of the mine. If these papers fall into the hands of the men who are working against us they may jump our claim, as they call it, for it is not yet legally secured to us.

"That is why I am so anxious not to have the expected letters lost. So if you get them, Jack, take good care of them."

"You can make sure I will!" exclaimed the pony rider.

"Oh, I'm not worrying about you, Jack. I mean I know I can trust you, just as I could have trusted your father were he on the express route. It's the other fellows I'm worrying about. They held you up once, Jack, and—"

"They won't get a second chance!" exclaimed the lad, with flashing eyes. "I'll be on the watch."

"Well, they're pretty foxy and cunning," went on the miner. "It's treachery more than anything else you have to fear now; treachery and guile. They'll try them now they've found out their hold-up methods didn't work!"

"Well, they may try them again," said Jack, "but they won't catch me napping again."

"Oh, I guess you weren't napping, Jack."

"No, not exactly. It all happened so suddenly they didn't give me a chance. Though I suppose that was their game. Well, I'll do my best."

"I know you will, Jack. Now, as I said, I don't know just when the documents will come. If I did I'd be there myself, and bring 'em through. I wouldn't ask you to take the risk."

"Oh, the risk is part of the game," Jack said.

"I know it is, but I don't believe in anybody—man or boy—taking too many. But, not knowing when they'll arrive, I'll have to trust the regular mail service. Only one thing, Jack. Don't bring them through at night. I mean by that, don't

make a night trip just for my papers. Of course, if you have to make a night ride anyhow, and the documents arrive at Golden Crossing, bring them along with you. But don't make a special trip on their account, as there is no rush about them. I suppose you can depend on the people at the other end of the line—I mean in the Golden Crossing office?"

"Well, I should say I could!" declared Jack, energetically. "Jennie Blake is postmistress there and—"

"Oh, I forgot. She's a relative of yours, isn't she?"

"Yes," answered Jack, and he blushed under his coat of tan.

"Well then of course it's all right. I am not greatly worried about the transportation from San Francisco to Golden Crossing. It's from there to here the documents will be taken, if at all."

"They won't be taken at all!" declared Jack. Of course, he was boyishly enthusiastic. For that one can not blame him. He was deeply interested in his work. To him it meant everything. He wanted to bring the mail through safe, and on time every trip. And, so far, he had more than made good.

That one hold-up did not count against him, especially as he had so soon recovered the bulk of the stuff.

"Well, I guess that's all I have to say to you, Jack," concluded the miner. "As I remarked, I can't say just when the papers will arrive. And when they do—well, take the best care of them you can."

"I wonder how it would do to try another ruse, and hide them, say in a loosely tied package, that looked as if it didn't contain anything more valuable than a pair of old shoes?"

"That might answer. But as you tried that game once, and it didn't work, it would hardly deceive the outlaws a second time. But use your own judgment, Jack. I leave it all to you. Only bring me the papers, and don't let the other fellows get them."

"I won't!"

"Shake!" exclaimed the miner, and their hands met in a firm clasp.

Jack rode the trail that day, reaching Golden Crossing with the packages and letters.

"Well, Jennie," he remarked, "the game is on."

"What game?" she asked. "I hope you don't mean any more bogus inspectors are coming here."

"No. I mean that any time now that package of mine documents may reach here. When it does, put it in the safe if I'm not here."

"And what are you going to do with it?"

"Carry it to Rainbow Ridge, of course."

"Oh, Jack! Suppose something happens?" half whispered Jennie.

"Well, I hope it doesn't. And I'm going to do my best to see that something doesn't happen. But if it does, well, I'll have to put up with it, I suppose," Jack said, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I almost hope the old package doesn't come," murmured Jennie, with a pout of her pretty lips.

"Oh, that wouldn't do," said Jack. "It's very valuable and important. And that's what the pony express is for—to transport speedily valuable and important packages and letters. I'll make out all right, I guess."

"I—I hope so," she faltered.

For several days after that Jack watched the mails anxiously for a sight of the package of documents relating to the mine. But it did not come, and as he made each trip he planned what to do at certain points of the road, where he might possibly be held up again.

"Though it's a question, just as Mr. Argent says, whether they would try the same tactics twice," Jack reasoned. "They may try some other game. I'll have to be on the watch for both."

Mr. Argent himself was getting anxious now. Each time Jack came into Rainbow Ridge from

his trip, the miner asked if the letters had come. Each time Jack answered in the negative.

"Well, they'll be along any day now," Mr. Argent would say. "Be on the lookout."

Jack was idling about the Golden Crossing post office about a week after he had received the caution to be on his guard. He was waiting for the stage to come in with the western mail, with which he expected to make the ride back to Rainbow Ridge.

A dusty messenger rode up on a tired and lather-covered horse, and called to Postmistress Jennie:

"Is the pony express rider here?"

"Yes," answered Jack, coming forward. "What's wanted?"

"Stage has had a bust-up a little way out," the messenger said. "I come in to get help, and to say that the driver wants to see you."

"Wants to see me?"

"Yes, he's got a bundle of mail that's marked '*Rush*,' and he wants to know if you can ride out there, get it and take it on to Rainbow Ridge."

"Well, I suppose I can," Jack said, "though it isn't regular."

"No, he told me to tell you he knowed that. And he said he'd have sent the mail in by me, only there's some valuable stuff in it, and he wants a regular man to take it. So will you go out?"

"I think I'd better, yes. How far out is the stage?"

"About five miles. Half way between Bosford and Tuckerton," was the answer.

"All right, I'll ride out and get the mail," decided Jack, and in due time he arrived at the place where the stage had been delayed because of a broken wheel. The mail was transferred to Jack, and he started back with it.

"I wonder if the important letters can be in this bag," mused Jack, as he urged Sunger onward. There was no way of telling.

The stage, as the messenger had said, had broken down half way between Bosford and Tuckerton. These were two small settlements, the last one being about three miles from Golden Crossing.

As Jack was passing through the eastern outskirts of Tuckerton he noticed that Sunger was limping slightly.

"Hello! What's this? Got a stone under your shoe?" he exclaimed, as he got off. He made an examination and found that such was the case. Sunger had gone lame, though not so badly but that, with the removal of the stone, the animal could be ridden.

"I'll fix you up," Jack said, as he guided the pony to a shady spot on the trail, and proceeded to get out a simple kit he carried with him for emergencies.

CHAPTER XVII

AN INVITATION DECLINED

JACK'S first idea was that he could soon and easily remove from between the hoof and shoe the small stone that was making his pony lame. But when he got to work at it, with a peculiarly shaped hook, such as is used for that purpose, the lad found the work was going to take longer than he had anticiated.

"But it's got to be done, old boy," he said, addressing the little horse. "It's got to be done, and I've got to do it. I can't very well walk you to the blacksmith shop back in town, for you'd be lamer than ever, and I'd probably have to stable you; and I can't leave you with the mail and go and get the smith to come out here. So I've got to do the work myself. I'll be a little late with the mail, but it can't be helped."

Jack realized that he would have a good excuse to offer for not getting back to Rainbow Ridge on time, as he had had to go out of his usual route to bring in the mail to Golden Crossing, which was still some miles away.

"They can't expect me to do two men's work

in the time of one, and especially when my pony goes lame," Jack murmured, as he worked over the stone, which persisted in staying where it had become wedged.

"Well, old boy, I don't seem to be coming along very fast," Jack went on, as he sat down to rest, for the day was hot, and, in spite of being in the shade, he felt the heat very much.

"I don't want to loosen your shoe too much, or it will come off, and then I'd be in a worse pickle than ever," he continued, talking aloud, as he frequently did when on the trail. "And yet if I don't, I can't see how I'm going to get at that stone. Well, we'll have another try in a minute."

Sunger did not seem to mind the rest. He began quietly cropping grass by the wayside when Jack let down the hoof in which the stone was imbedded. As long as the pony rested no weight on that foot he was all right. It was when he walked or galloped with Jack and the sacks of mail on his back, bringing pressure to bear, that the lameness was noticeable.

Again the young express rider busied himself with the task. He shook his head over the work, for it seemed more and more impossible to get the stone out without taking off the shoe, and that would mean going back to the blacksmith's shop to have it nailed on again.

"Regular nuisance, having this happen," said Jack. "But of course I know it isn't your fault, Sunger."

The sound of hoof-beats on the trail caused Jack to look up as he was bending over the shoe. He saw riding toward him a stranger. The latter drew up his horse, nodded in friendly fashion, and remarked:

"You seem to be having some trouble there."

"Yes," Jack admitted. "Pony's gone lame. Got a stone under his shoe, and I don't seem to get it out."

"A bad thing in your business, I should judge," the man went on. "Pony express rider, aren't you?"

That could be told by a glance at the mail sacks.

"Yes," Jack answered, for the man seemed anxious to be friendly. "I ride between Golden Crossing and Rainbow Ridge."

"Sort of out of your way here, aren't you?"

"Yes. I had to ride out to get the mail. Stage broke down again. I'm going in to Golden Crossing now, and then on to the Ridge. That is, I am if I can get this stone out."

"Say, if you don't mind, let me have a chance at it," suggested the man, getting off his horse with an ease that showed he was accustomed to the saddle. "I used to know something about

smithy work, and I've got a better hook than the one you're using."

"Well, if you don't mind, I wish you would have a try," said Jack, straightening up his bent and aching back. "It seems to have gotten the best of me."

The stranger patted Sunger, who sniffed at him and seemed satisfied. The pony rubbed his velvet nose against the man's coat. This was his way of making friends. Sunger did not do this with every one, either, and Jack felt more interest in the newcomer on that account.

"Now, let's see what we have here," the man went on, as he lifted the pony's lame foot. "Oh, my name's Ryan," he added, as an afterthought.

"And mine's Jack Bailey," said our hero, completing the introduction.

"Glad to meet you. I'm riding your way, and I'll go on with you after I get you fixed up, or, rather, your pony.

"Think you can do it?" Jack asked.

"Oh yes, I'll soon have this out. You almost had it yourself, but you were working at it the wrong way."

He proved that he knew what he was talking about a few minutes later, by exclaiming:

"There it is!"

He held up the stone that had caused all the trouble. It was of peculiar shape, which account-

ed for the manner in which it had become wedged fast.

"Thanks!" Jack exclaimed. "Now the question is about the shoe. Is it so loose that I can't go on?"

"It is a bit loose," the man said. "But I can fix that for you. I carry a spare shoe or two myself. They wouldn't fit your pony, for they are too large. But I've got a hammer and nails in my saddle bags. I ride about a good bit, and my nag often casts a shoe, so I go prepared. I'll have this one tightened up in a jiffy."

Jack watched Ryan interestedly. The man seemed very capable, and it is often the custom of cowboys or range riders to carry with them spare shoes, nails and a hammer, to reset a shoe of their mounts when far from a blacksmith shop.

In a few minutes the shoe was as tight as necessary, and Jack could again mount his pony and ride on.

"I'm a thousand times obliged to you," he said to Ryan. "It was quite a job, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes. Not so hard as some I've tackled, though. But it's a warm day, and I think after that we're entitled to a little refreshment. What do you say?"

For a moment Jack did not understand.

"Refreshment," he repeated. "There's no place around here where you can get anything

to eat. No places short of going back to Tuckerton. And I'm not hungry enough for that."

"Hungry? Shucks, no! I'm not myself. I wasn't talking about anything to eat. I meant something to drink."

"Oh," said Jack, and a queer sort of feeling came over him. "Well, there's no ice cream soda place around here, either," and he smiled.

"Ice cream soda? Shucks! I'm talking about a man's drink! And I don't need any one to wait on me, either. I carry it with me. It's safer in case of emergency," and he laughed in what he evidently meant to be taken as a friendly fashion.

"Here, have a smile with me," he went on, producing a pocket flask. "It's stuff I can recommend," he added. "It'll do you good after working over that shoe. Come on, help yourself, and then I'll take what you leave, though there's plenty in that bottle, and more where that came from."

He held out a dark flask to Jack.

Jack backed away and shook his head.

"No, thank you," he said, firmly.

"What!" the man exclaimed in seeming surprise. "You don't drink?"

"No," Jack replied. "It wouldn't do in my business, you know. Besides, I wouldn't drink anyhow."

"Oh, shucks! Just one wouldn't hurt you, and

there's no one to know. Your boss won't find it out, for I won't tell. After going through what you have you need a drink."

"Perhaps I do," said Jack with a smile, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, "but I don't want that kind of a drink. There's a spring just a few steps on, and it's the coldest and best water for miles around. I'm going to have some of that, and give the pony some, too. Your horse would appreciate it, I think."

"Humph! Water may be all right for horses, but I don't care for it," was the somewhat sneering answer. "Then you won't drink with me, Jack Bailey?"

"No, thank you. I'll join you in a tin dipper of spring water, but that's all."

"Well, if you won't you won't, I suppose," the man said, slowly. "Everybody to their notion. I don't take much, but I like a little now and then. So here goes."

Jack did not stay to see what the man did, but walked on to the spring with Sunger. The pony showed no trace of lameness, now, for which Jack was glad, as he had a hard ride ahead of him.

As the lad was getting himself a drink, and letting Sunger get some from a pool below the spring, Jack heard the sound of a galloping horse, and looked up in surprise.

CHAPTER XVIII

A QUEER FEELING

JACK's first thought was that Ryan had ridden off in haste after having helped himself to a drink from the flask, but, somewhat to his surprise, he saw the man who had removed the stone from the pony's hoofs still standing beside his horse. The galloping came from another rider who seemed in haste. He waved his hand to Jack, and cried:

"Hold on! Wait!"

"Well, I wonder what's up now?" mused the pony express lad. "He seems to want me."

"I was afraid I wouldn't catch you," exclaimed the young fellow who had ridden up in such haste. Jack recognized him then as Harry Montgomery, an employee of the stage line that ran out of Golden Crossing to the west.

"Do you want me?" Jack asked.

"Yes. They forgot to give you some important mail stuff when you rode out to the stage a while ago. The stage has come on into Tuck-

erton now, and the driver sent me on to see if I could catch you. He wants you to ride back into town, if you will, and get the stuff he forgot to give you."

"Why didn't he let you bring it?" asked Jack, not much relishing the ride back. It would delay him still further, and he had enough valuable mail in his possession now without wishing for any more.

"The driver said he didn't like to have me carry it, as I'm not supposed to do that. Besides he wants you to receipt for it. But if I couldn't catch up to you I guess he intended to hold the stuff over until your next trip."

"Oh well, as long as it's only a case of a mile's ride back to Tuckerton, I suppose I'd better do it," Jack reasoned. "You wouldn't have caught me, only my pony went lame and I was delayed getting the stone out," he said to Harry. This gentleman helped me."

"Oh, it wasn't much," said Ryan, nodding to Harry. The latter did not appear to know him. The flask which had been in so much evidence a little while before was not in sight now.

"Yes, I'll ride back and get the stuff," Jack decided. It had come into his mind that perhaps the forgotten package contained the letters Mr. Argent was expecting. They might have been sent by special mail, and not be in the regular

sacks. It would be best for Jack to go, though he would be delayed.

"And if it's too late, and if I think they are the letters about the secret mine, I won't do any night-riding," Jack decided, mentally.

"Well, I'm glad I caught you," Harry said, as he turned his horse about.

"Yes, it would have been too bad if you had had your ride for nothing," the pony express lad said. "Well, Sunger, old boy, we'll hit the back trail again for a little while," and Jack swung himself up into the saddle.

Somewhat to Jack's surprise, when Ryan mounted, he, also, turned his horse's head in the direction of Tuckerton.

"Are you going back, too?" Jack asked him.

"Yes, I guess I might as well."

"But I thought you were going to Golden Crossing."

"So I am. But it just occurred to me that I am hungry, and there's an eating place in Tuckerton, isn't there?"

"Yes," answered Harry. "But it isn't a very good one."

"Oh, well, when a man's hungry he can't be too particular. I guess I can stand it."

The three rode back together, and in a short time had reached the small town. The stage had pulled in, temporary repairs having been made,

and the driver who handed Jack a sealed package expressed regret at having to bring him back.

"It was all my fault, too," the driver said. "I ought to have remembered about this special package, for they told me there was some hurry about it. But I was sort of knocked out by the accident, and it slipped my mind. I'm glad you've got it now."

Jack looked at it. The packet might contain letters, though it did not look large enough to hold maps of any size. And, to Jack's surprise, it was addressed, not to Mr. Argent, but to the postmaster at Rainbow Ridge. He had been so sure that it was the valuable letters and papers the miner expected that for the moment Jack almost expressed his astonishment. But Ryan and some others were standing near-by, and the lad felt it better to keep still.

Besides, the letters Mr. Argent expected might be in the regular mail bags, which Jack carried on his saddle, those bags not having been opened since he received them from the broken-down stage.

"Well, I guess now you're all right," the stage driver went on. "You can get on your way, Jack. I won't have to call you back again."

"I hope not. I'm late enough as it is."

"I'm sorry, my boy."

"Well, it couldn't be helped, I suppose. I

don't want to make a night trip, if I can help it."

"Do you often do that?" asked Ryan.

"Oh, occasionally. But since I was held up once I don't hanker after it."

"Were you held up?" Ryan seemed much interested.

"Yes," Jack said, but he did not go into details. He had no time.

"I say!" exclaimed Ryan, as Jack was about to ride off again. "It wouldn't be a bad idea for you to have a blacksmith look at that shoe I fixed. I did the best I could, but I can't guarantee that it will stay on. There's a smithy right across the way."

"I believe I will do that," Jack said. "It won't be any joke if Sunger casts a shoe when I get on the mountain trail. I'll take him over to the shop."

The smith was busy, but Jack decided to wait.

"I'll have plenty of time if I don't have to make a night ride," he remarked.

"Say, while you're waiting," suggested Ryan, who had followed Jack over to the blacksmith shop, "why not come and have a bite to eat with me. You wouldn't drink with me, but you can't object to eating."

He seemed so much in earnest about it, and so friendly, that Jack did not like to refuse. After all, Ryan had been very helpful to him, and the matter of drinking Jack could overlook. It was

more or less a settled custom in the West, anyhow.

"I'm not very hungry," Jack began, "but—"

"Oh, well, come and have a cup of coffee," suggested Ryan. "It won't take long, and by the time we're through with our little snack your pony will be ready for you. Come along."

"All right," Jack agreed, and he followed his new acquaintance across the street to a small restaurant. Jack ordered a sandwich and a cup of coffee, but Ryan called for a more substantial meal.

"And I'll have mine in a hurry, if you don't mind," said Jack to the waiter. "I've got to get back on the trail."

"Have it right away," was the answer.

Jack sipped some of his coffee, and ate the sandwich. He was waiting for the beverage to cool somewhat before taking the remainder, when Ryan, nodding in the direction of the entrance to the restaurant, toward which Jack had his back, said:

"Is that a friend of yours? He seems to be looking for some one."

Jack turned. A man was standing in the doorway of the eating place, his eyes roving about as though looking for somebody, but Jack did not know him, nor did the stranger show any sign of interest in the pony express rider.

Jack turned back in time to see Ryan setting

down the cup of coffee from which Jack had been drinking.

"Huh! That's one on me!" laughed the man. "I picked up your cup for my own. Don't worry though. I didn't drink any of your coffee."

"That's all right," Jack said, pleasantly. "I'll finish now, and get along."

"Well, good luck to you," returned Ryan. "I'll stay and finish my meal," he added. "Good-bye. Glad to have met you."

"Good-bye," answered Jack. "Much obliged for your help, and for this feed."

"Shucks! I don't call that much of a feed. Leave me the checks, waiter. Well, I may see you again," he called, with a wave of his hand as Jack went out.

"Yes, I'm back and forth quite often, though I seldom get to Tuckerton, unless there's some accident to the stage," the lad said.

He found his pony's shoe had been properly tightened, and the animal was now ready for him. Jack paid his smithy bill, jumped up to the saddle and rode on through the town again.

"We'll have to make time," whispered the lad to his pony, making sure that the mail sacks were securely fastened, and that he had the sealed packet which he had ridden back to get. "Yes, Sunger, we'll make time, so in case we do have to make a night ride we won't be delayed too long. Queer chap, that Ryan," mused Jack. "It

was good of him to blow me to coffee. But I can't say I think much of that eating place. That was about the poorest coffee I've had in a good while. Whew! The bitterness of it is in my mouth yet! I'll wash it out with a drink of water when I get to the spring again. I wonder what Ryan's business is, and where he is headed for? He must be pretty hungry to order so much eating stuff."

If Jack could have looked back into the restaurant he would have been surprised to see the same Ryan hastily leave, soon after he himself had come out. And the same Ryan left most of his dinner untouched.

"What's the matter, don't you like the grub?" asked the waiter, as Ryan hurried out.

"Sure, it's all right!" and he tossed him a tip. "But I forgot I had an engagement," and with that he jumped into his saddle and rode off. But not in the direction Jack had taken.

"My, my!" said Jack, talking to himself as he galloped along, "that coffee certainly was bitter. It seems to be getting worse—that taste in my mouth. I believe it's giving me a head ache, too. I certainly do feel queer—sort of dizzy. Maybe it was the hot sun. I'll cool off at the spring. But I do feel so queer," and Jack passed his hand across his forehead.

CHAPTER XIX

A DESPERATE RIDE

NEARING the spring, where he had taken a drink before that day, Jack was about to dismount to get some cooling water. But such a strange feeling of weakness and dizziness came over him that he had to hold himself in the saddle.

"I—I'm afraid if I get out I won't be able to get up again," he murmured weakly. "Sunger, what's the matter with me, I wonder?"

Then, ill as he felt himself becoming, like a flash an idea came to Jack. The meaning of it all came to him instantly.

"I've been drugged!" he said, hoarsely. "That Ryan! That was his game. He drugged my coffee, that time when he made me turn around! I saw him putting back my cup! He put some drug in my coffee to make me unconscious!"

For a moment the thought of the desperate

trick that had been played on him made Jack so angry that he succeeded in fighting off the feeling of weakness and dizziness. But it was only for a moment. Then it came back with increasing distress.

"That was the game," he murmured, scarcely able to see now. "He probably had doped the whiskey in that flask, but I didn't take that. Then he watched his chance, urged me to take something to eat with him, and put some drug in my coffee. No wonder it tasted bitter and queer! What a simpleton I was to take it! But I did not know."

Jack was reeling in the saddle. The pony sensed that something was wrong with his master, and stopped.

"No, don't stop! Go on! Go on!" urged Jack. "Oh, what am I going to do?" he murmured. "I'm on a lonely trail, with the valuable mail and express. That's what Ryan counts on. He thinks I'll fall by the wayside and he can come up and get what he wants when I'm unconscious.

"But what is it he wants? The Argent letters, of course. That's what he's after! He's drugged me. He's going to give me time to fall in a faint, and then he's coming along to rob the mail. The Argent letters must be in the sacks that aren't opened. He must have found that

out in some way, and have been on the watch for me.

"But he won't get them. I'll not let him rob the mail!" cried Jack, speaking aloud, and trying to put some fierce energy into his voice. But it died away faintly.

"How can I stop him? How can I foil him?" mused the ill and almost fainting rider. "I—I've got to do something. But what? I can't stay in the saddle much longer. Go on, Sunger! Go on!"

For the pony had stopped again.

Jack wanted desperately to get a drink from the cold spring, but he dared not.

"If I leave the saddle I'd not have strength to get up in it again," he reasoned. "But I've got to do something! I've got to do something!"

He repeated the words over and over again, until they rang in his numbed brain like the refrain of some song. Sunger did not know what to make of it all. He could tell something was wrong, and whinnied once or twice. But Jack was too ill to answer him, or pat him caressingly as he always did.

"Sunger, we've got to do something! We've got to do something to save the mail!" whispered the poor lad. He was too weak to do more than whisper.

Jack tried to listen, and to ascertain if the

outlaw who had played this trick on him was coming behind him on the trail, for he realized that Ryan would soon follow, to reap the fruits of his villany. But there was no sound save the echo of Sunger's hoof-beats. It was getting late in the afternoon.

Jack was reeling in the saddle now. He could hardly hold himself upright. Once or twice he nearly fell out, but clutched the pommel in time. Once or twice, too, the pony stopped, but Jack urged him on. He knew his only hope lay either in reaching Golden Crossing, or in some one on the trail seeing his plight and looking after him. But there was not much chance of this last, for the disabled stage would not be along for some hours yet.

Then, as he thought of what it would mean to him to have the mail robbed a second time while in his possession, a desperate plan came into Jack's mind.

"I'll tie myself to the saddle!" he whispered. "I've got plenty of rope for that. I'll lash myself fast. Then if I do get unconscious, which I'm afraid is going to happen, I won't fall out.

"And when I tie myself fast, Sunger," Jack went on, speaking as loudly as he could; "when I'm lashed fast, and don't know anything, you've got to go on and carry the mail—and me. You've got to take the mail safe through to Jennie at

Golden Crossing, and you've got to do it without my guidance. You know the trail, Sunger! You've got to take the mail through! It's the only way to save it!"

Jack felt that it was useless longer to try to fight off the effects of the drug. It was too strong and powerful for him, and he realized that he must have been given a heavy dose. He could hardly see now.

Jack carried with him a light but strong rope, for often he had to tie mail pouches on the saddle behind him. With hands that trembled, with his head aching terribly, and his eyes burning, Jack managed to pass about his legs, and under the saddle girths, several turns of the rope. He made himself fast in the saddle, so he would not fall off.

Then, when the last knot had been tied and made secure, Jack fell forward on his pony's neck.

"Go on, Sunger!" he said feebly. "Go on to Jennie and Golden Crossing. It's my only chance. You've got to run now as you never ran before! You've got to carry the mail! Go on, Sunger! Don't fail me now, or it will be all up with dad and me! Don't fail, Sunger! Go on!"

With this last urging Jack's eyes closed, and he felt himself going off into unconsciousness.

Then the brave and intelligent Sunger sprang

forward. Somehow the pony must have understood. At any rate, he knew that all haste must be made on the trail. He was carrying the mail, and Jack always urged him to top speed on such occasions.

With the instinct that characterizes dogs, horses and other animals, Sunger knew that he must go on to the Post Office. Just what had happened to his master, of course Sunger did not know. But it was something wrong—the pony sensed that.

And so with the unconscious form strapped to the saddle, with Jack's head pillowed on Sunger's neck, the plucky animal started to foil the plans of the plotters. On and on he galloped over the mountain trail, Jack swaying from side to side, but remaining safe because of the holding ropes.

It was about this time that Ryan, who, by a roundabout road, had reached the trail leading from Tuckerton to Golden Crossing, looked at his watch in a secluded place where he was waiting, and remarked:

"Well, it ought to be working by this time. I guess I'll amble along and see what's doing. I ought to get the letters without any trouble. I certainly dosed his coffee good and strong," and he smiled in an evil fashion.

Springing into the saddle he urged his horse along the trail. He did not hurry, for he wanted

to give the drug time to work its full and stupefying effect. Ryan was a different sort of worker from the other outlaws. He did not believe in their rough and ready methods, but, instead, used sneaking means, such as drugs, that were often no less successful.

"This hold-up work doesn't pay when you can get the same results without attracting so much attention," he murmured as he rode on. "Now I wonder if I had better take that last package they gave him. I don't believe the maps will be in that, though. They must be in the sacks. I hope I have a key that will fit the lock. I don't want to cut the bags if I can help it.

"If I can come up when he's lying unconscious, pick the locks, and get out what I want, I can lock the mail pouches again, and he won't know he's been robbed for some hours. That will give me that much more time to get away. Yes, that's my best plan," and as Ryan rode along he examined several keys which he took from a pocket. He had made his plans carefully.

It was not until the outlaw had reached a point near the spring that he began to be at all concerned. Up to then he had felt sure of the result of his desperate work.

"Why, I ought to have come upon him before this," he reasoned, wonderingly. "That stuff would knock out a strong man, let alone a lad like

him. He ought to have fallen off, or have gotten off, and become unconscious before this. I wonder if I made any mistake."

He went over in his mind the different points of his plot. It seemed perfect. But where was his victim who should have been lying unconscious beside the road?

"Something's wrong!" Ryan exclaimed, as he passed the spring. He looked about. The trail was dusty, but he could see no signs of Jack's having dismounted, or indications that the lad had fallen and gotten up to the saddle again.

"Something's wrong," Ryan repeated. Then he put spurs to his horse and galloped down the trail toward Golden Crossing.

CHAPTER XX

AT GOLDEN CROSSING

"JACK is late, isn't he, Jennie?" asked Mrs. Blake, as she sat in the Golden Crossing post office. She had finished her sewing, and had stopped for a little chat.

"Well, you know he had to ride out and get the mail from the disabled stage coach," replied the girl, as she made some entries in her books. "And perhaps he had to go farther than the messenger said. There's plenty of time, though."

"Well, he's late," Mrs. Blake repeated. "I hope he doesn't have to make a night trip."

"So do I," her daughter murmured, as she thought of the time Jack had been held up. "It isn't likely he will, though. You know, Mr. Perkfeld said he needn't make those night trips any more unless there was something very important."

"You never can tell when some important matter will come in, though," resumed Mrs. Blake,

after a pause, during which she had gone to the window to peer down the trail in the direction from which Jack would come. "And isn't he expecting something for Mr. Argent?"

"Yes, and that is the only thing I'm worrying about," confessed Jennie. "If those letters come in Jack will be sure to want to ride off with them at once, night or day. And we won't know when the letters do arrive until the mail sacks come here and I open them."

"Well, it certainly is a risky business, this pony express," sighed her mother.

"It wouldn't be so risky if it wasn't for those desperate outlaws, and the other men who want Jack's position," Jennie said, her eyes flashing. "It makes me so mad when I think what an unfair advantage they take that I wish I were a man so I could help Jack fight them!"

"My!" laughed Mrs. Blake. "But I guess you're better off inside here, than out on the mountain trail."

"Yes, I suppose so. That's all we women are good for, anyhow, to sit and wait and worry!"

"Any one would think you were twice as old as you are," said Mrs. Blake with a smile at her daughter. "Hark! Is that he coming?"

They both started toward the door, but, with a sigh of disappointment, Jennie Said:

"No, it's only Tim Mullane."

The red-haired, genial Irish lad entered with a grin.

"Jack not here yet?" he asked, with some surprise.

"Oh, I wish you wouldn't say that!" Jennie exclaimed, and her voice was not her usual one.

"Why, what's the matter?" her mother asked, in some surprise.

"Oh, it makes me nervous when any one speaks about Jack's not being back. It—it's just as if—as if something had happened to him!" she faltered.

"Oh sure, miss, what could happen to him?" asked Tim, seeing with his Irish quickness "which way the wind blew."

"Nothing, of course," Jennie went on. "He just rode out to get the mail because the stage was broken down. Maybe he knows there is nothing important in it, so he can stay here all night."

"Of course," agreed Mrs. Blake. But to herself she said. "I do wish Jack would come!"

There was nothing to do, however, save wait, and that is often the hardest kind of work, as it is certainly the most nervous. Jennie and her mother busied themselves about the post office, Jennie asking the advice of Mrs. Blake on certain matters connected with the reports she had to send in to the officials.

"I suppose there will be a real post office inspector along some day to go over my accounts," she ventured.

"Perhaps," her mother admitted. "And if any more bogus ones come on the scene, I hope I'm here—or that Jack is."

"Yes, Jack routed that other chap finely," said Jennie.

And so they waited for the return of the pony express rider.

Meanwhile, what of Jack? Brave and intelligent Sunger was galloping on with his senseless burden. The pony seemed to know just what to do. He took the easiest part of the mountain trail, avoiding places where he might stumble or fall, for he seemed to realize that Jack's guiding and careful hand was not at the reins now.

On and on galloped the animal, making the best speed he could, though the trail was hard and steep in places.

Suddenly, from the road back of him, Sunger heard the sound of galloping. The pony pricked up his ears. Another rider was coming. Who it might be Sunger, of course, did not know. But the little pony had been trained never to let another horse pass him from behind on the mail route. It was not so much a matter of necessity as it was of pride, and Jack's pony now increased his pace.

And then, at a level place on the trail, and one that was straight, where a good view could be had ahead, there swung into view behind Sunger a horse, carrying a man who was urging his mount on with whip, spur and voice.

"So that's why I didn't find him as I expected to!" exclaimed Ryan, for he it was who was galloping behind the unconscious form of Jack Bailey. "He's sticking to his horse, but he must be all in. That lad's got grit and pluck, and I'm almost sorry I had to do him up. But I had to. We simply must get the information about that mine, and this was the only plan I thought would work. But he sure has grit and spunk to ride on with that dose in him."

From where he was, Ryan could not see the device of ropes Jack had used to prevent falling from the back of his pony during his unconsciousness. The outlaw merely thought that Jack was only partly under the influence of the drug, and that the youth was clinging with his arms about Sunger's neck.

"I wonder if I can ride him down?" mused the desperate man. "I've just got to, that's all. I let him get too much the start, but I sure did think I'd find him senseless beside the road!"

But Ryan reckoned without his host. Sunger was not going to be caught. The going was better now, and the little pony had the advantage

of not carrying as much weight as did the larger horse. Moreover, Sunger was naturally fleeter.

So, though Ryan urged his own steed as he had seldom urged it before, the gap between the two animals did not close up. In fact it semed to widen, and when Ryan saw that he became desperate.

"Who'd think he could beat me this way?" he asked himself. "No human being, I thought, could keep his senses after that dose I put in his coffee. It won't do him any permanent harm, that's one thing I'm glad of, for after a lad has made the plucky fight he has I don't wish him harm, even if we have to take desperate measures against him. He'll be all right again in a couple of hours. But why doesn't he fall off?"

It was not until some time later that Ryan learned why, and then his admiration for Jack increased. For, bad and unscrupulous as he was, Ryan had once been a good man, and he could admire grit and fine qualities in others, though he could not exercise them himself.

"I've got to get him soon, or we'll be plump into Golden Crossing, and then the jig will be up, I fear," Ryan said fiercely. "They'll say I bungled the job, and they'll try another hold-up, I suppose. For those letters are in that mail, and we must have them!"

But as he galloped on for another quarter of a

mile, it became increasingly evident that Sunger was not to be overtaken. The louder the hoof-beats of the other horse sounded, the faster the plucky little pony ran, though he was now tiring. But he was game, all the way through, and never would give up while he had an ounce of strength left in him.

"Well, there's only one way to end it," said Ryan aloud. He drew his revolver. "I hate to shoot a fine little pony like that," the man went on, "but I've got to stop him somehow, and I can't ride him down. It's the only way!"

Carefully he took aim, and was about to pull the trigger. Then he hesitated and lowered the weapon.

"No, I haven't the nerve," he muttered. "If I kill the pony he'll go over, and the boy may be killed too. I can't do it. It goes against me. I'm bad enough all the way through, but I'm not going to do anything like that, and I'll tell the gang so. If I can't ride him down he'll have to get away, as far as I'm concerned. I can't do that!"

He shoved the weapon back into the holster, and exclaimed:

"Now, you brute, I'm going to make you run!"

He whipped his own horse cruelly, and the animal, in terror, did respond with a burst of

speed. It came too late, however, for a few minutes later the trail turned, and Ryan knew he was near Golden Crossing—too near for safety.

"No use!" he muttered! I've got to give up. I'll go and tell the gang. Maybe they can get the letters some other way. They aren't in Rainbow Ridge yet, and lots of things can happen on the road. I'll tell the gang and we'll think up something new."

He reined in his nearly exhausted horse, and swung back down the trail, riding slowly. Sunger, with his unconscious burden, kept on. The race was almost run, and it was high time, for the pony was all but fagged out.

And then into the very streets of the mountain town went the little horse. Straight through the streets, bearing unconscious Jack. And those who saw wondered, though some may have guessed what had happened.

Several raced after Sunger, who was now abating some of his speed. For he saw, just ahead of him, the post office. That was the goal for which he had striven, and he seemed to realize that the race was won.

No one attempted to stop Sunger. They knew where he would go. And reaching the rail where Jack always tied him at one side of the Golden Crossing post office, the pony stopped. He spread

his legs far apart, for he was trembling from weariness.

"Oh, it's Jack!" cried Jennie, looking from the window to see the meaning of the galloping, and of the strange cries. "It's Jack! Something has happened!" she faltered, as she saw the unconscious form in the saddle. "Oh, Mother! He—he's dead!"

Tim Mullane was at the side of the unconscious pony rider.

"No, he isn't dead!" he shouted, "but he's in a bad way. Here, some of yez give me a hand and we'll loosen him up, and take him inside. Poor lad! He's had a hard time!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE ARGENT LETTERS

THEY carried Jack inside, and laid him on a couch. Jennie and her mother used what simple remedies they had at hand to rouse him from his unconscious state. Tim took the exhausted pony to the stable, for Sunger was much in need of rest.

"What was it? What happened to the pony express?" asked several of the crowd that had gathered outside when they had seen the animal canter up with Jack on his back.

"I don't know what happened," replied the red-haired helper. "But maybe it was Indians tied him that way, and was going to make his pony jump over a cliff. Them Indians is fierce!"

"Indians! There aren't any around here!" said some one, laughing at Tim's notion. Tim had not been out West long.

"More likely it was some of those hold-up fellows," suggested a man in the throng. "Though why they should tie him to his horse is more than I can figure out."

"Well, Jack came through all right, or, rather,

that smart pony of his brought him," another voice said. "And he brought the mail safe!"

"That's what he did!" cried several.

Meanwhile inside the little cottage, part of which was given over to the Golden Crossing post office, Jennie and her mother were working hard over the unconscious form of Jack.

"I guess we'll have to send for the doctor, Jennie," finally said Mrs. Blake. "I've tried ammonia and camphor, and he doesn't come to. He may be badly hurt, thought it doesn't show."

Oh, mother!" faltered the girl. "Poor Jack!"

"Eh? What's the matter? Who's calling me?" asked Jack himself in a faint voice. It was as though he had murmured in his sleep. He slowly opened his eyes.

"Oh, mother! It's all right! He's waking up!" Jennie exclaimed. "We won't need a doctor right away. Oh, Jack, what happened you?"

Jack's senses were slowly but surely clearing. His head hurt him very much, but that terrible sick feeling was passing away. He was in a daze yet, and the voices of Jennie and her mother seemed far away, indeed.

"Why I'm here—in the post office!" Jack suddenly exclaimed, with more energy than before. His eyes were wide open now, and he looked about the familiar room.

"Of course you're in the post office, or, rather, in our sitting room that opens from it," said Jennie.

"But the mail! The mail!" Jack suddenly cried, trying to sit up. The motion sent such a rush of blood to his head that he had to fall limply back.

"I—I'll be all right in a minute," Jack said, after a pause. "But what about the mail? Tell me that! Did I bring it through safely?"

"That's what you did!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake. "It was safe on your saddle, and you were tied fast to your pony. Who did that."

"I did it myself," Jack answered. "But I'm glad I brought the mail in safely. I was afraid I couldn't do it, but I did."

"Do you mean to say you roped yourself fast that way?" demanded Jennie, somewhat incredulously.

"I did," Jack replied.

"Why, the idea! We thought the hold-up men did."

"I did it to fool the hold-up rascals," said Jack. He was feeling better every minute now, and when he had taken some of the spirits of ammonia Mrs. Blake held out to him, his head cleared very much.

"One of them, named Ryan, put up a game on me," Jack explained. "He tried to get me

to take a drugged drink, and, when I refused, though of course I didn't know it was drugged, he put some stuff in my coffee. Queer stuff it must be. For it certainly knocked me out, but I don't feel nearly so bad now."

Just what sort of drug it was that Ryan used on Jack was never revealed. It was said later that the man himself had once been an expert chemist, and he probably knew the secrets of drugs better than the average criminal. Whatever it was he gave Jack, it left no harmful after effects, and for that the pony rider was thankful.

"Do you want a doctor?" asked Mrs. Blake. "We'll send for one, Jack, if you say so."

"No, I think I'll be all right," he answered. "I'm feeling better by the minute. Oh, but I was sick!" and he shuddered at the recollection. "But where is the mail?" he demanded, and this time he followed his question by sitting up. "Where is it?" he repeated.

"Tim brought it in," Jennie replied. "I haven't opened it yet. There was so much excitement when we saw what a state you were in that I let the mail wait. There's a crowd outside now, waiting to hear the story."

"Well, I don't feel like telling them," said Jack. "I want to sit here and rest. Is Sunger all right?"

"Yes," Mrs. Blake reported. "I'll go out

and tell the folks something of what happened. Later on they can hear the whole story. But shan't I notify the sheriff or some one, and have them get after this Ryan? What became of him?"

"The last I saw of him was when he was sitting in the restaurant," Jack answered. "He said good-bye in the friendliest fashion. And to think of the trick he played on me! Said he'd see me again, the scoundrel!"

"And did he see you again?" asked Mrs. Blake.

"No," Jack answered. But he did not know how Ryan had pursued him, and then disappeared.

"He must have had it all figured out," the lad went on. "He planned to come up to me after I had fallen unconscious. Then he'd take the mail. Are you sure it's safe?" he asked again.

"Yes," replied Jennie. "I'll bring it in here and let you see it if necessary."

"No, I'll go out to it," replied Jack. "I'm feeling almost myself again."

"Better take a little more rest," suggested Mrs. Blake.

She had gone outside to explain matters to the waiting and anxious crowd, which, having had its curiosity satisfied, in a measure, now dispersed. Some of the younger lads went over to the stable where Sunger was resting. They wanted to look

at, and marvel over, the plucky pony that had done so much to safeguard Jack and the mail.

Jack got to his feet. He had, however, overestimated his strength, for he tottered and would have fallen had not Jennie put out her hands to steady him.

"Look out!" she cautioned him.

"Humph! I'm a regular girl!" complained Jack, somewhat ashamed of his weakness.

"Take care!" Jennie playfully retorted. "Girls are a whole lot better than boys, in many ways."

"Yes, I know," confessed Jack. "If it were not for you and your mother I don't know what I'd do. But I guess I can walk now. Queer how that stuff, whatever it was, knocked me out."

"Here, drink this," suggested Mrs. Blake, and she held out a cup of coffee she had brewed.

"Coffee!" Jack exclaimed, with a grim smile. "Are you sure it's all right.?"

"No drug in that," Jennie's mother assured him. "It will make you feel better. Then I'll get supper. You can eat, can't you?"

"Yes, my appetite doesn't seem to have left me in spite of what I went through. I didn't take much in that restaurant. I was too anxious to get away with the mail."

Jack drank the coffee, and it made him feel better. Then he said:

"Now for the mail. I want to see it opened, Jennie, so I'll know just what it was I brought through."

"But you're not going on through to Rainbow Ridge to-night, are you?" she asked anxiously.

"I guess not," was his answer. "Can't tell though, until I see what's in the mail. I may have to."

"Well, we'll just not let you!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake with vigor. "If there is anything that has to go through I'll get Tim, or some one else, to ride the trail. We'll even send two men if necessary."

"Oh, I can't give up that way!" Jack protested.

"Well, maybe there isn't anything to carry," suggested Jennie. "I'll open the mail and we'll look."

She turned the key in the lock of the first sack, and spilled the contents out on the sorting table. Almost the first thing she and Jack saw was a flat package, sealed with red wax. Jack quickly turned it over.

"It's for Mr. Argent!" he exclaimed. "I wonder if these can be the important letters and plans he is expecting? They must be, and that's why Ryan tried to get them!"

Jennie said nothing, but looked at Jack with troubled eyes.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MASKED MAN

For a few seconds the two young people remained looking alternately at one another, and then at the packet which they guessed contained the long-expected and important papers. The red wax, with which the package was sealed, gleamed in the lamp-light, for one had been set aglow. It was dark early on this night, as clouds overcast the sky.

"Yes, these must be the papers Mr. Argent is expecting," Jack said, musingly. "I wonder what I'd better do about them?"

"What is there to do?" asked Mrs. Blake.

"Well, I think I ought to take them to him. I feel all right now. The effects of that drug has passed off, and—"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Jennie's mother; "you shall do nothing of the sort. No trip to Rainbow Ridge to-night!"

"But he may want them!" insisted Jack. "And I promised to bring them through for him. I think I must go."

"Please don't," pleaded Jennie. "We can lock the letters in the safe here, and you can take them the first thing in the morning. You know you were told not to make a night trip unless it was absolutely necessary, and it isn't. There isn't anything here that must go through before morning," and she rapidly sorted over the mail and express matter to prove what she said.

"And didn't Mr. Argent tell you not to take the risk of a night trip just for these letters?" asked Mrs. Blake.

"Yes, he did, but—"

"Then don't go. In fact it would not be fair to him to risk taking them after dark, when you know his enemies are after them. You have had a narrow escape this afternoon, you are weak, and—"

"Oh, I'm all right now!" insisted Jack. "I feel fine."

He certainly looked it. His health had enabled him to make a quick recovery from the effects of the drug, the life he lived in the open air doing much to help his system throw off the effects of the narcotic. Jack looked able to make a night ride.

"You may feel fine," said Mrs. Blake, determined to carry her point, "but there is no telling when there might be a reaction, and a return of that dizzy feeling. If you fell off your pony in

the dark, at some lonesome point of the mountain trail, you might not only suffer yourself, but it would give Mr. Argent's enemies the very chance for which they are scheming."

"Well, that's so," Jack admitted. "I didn't think of that."

"Then you won't go?" asked Jennie.

"No, I think perhaps I'd better not. But is there a good place here to keep the package?"

"We have a safe," replied Mrs. Blake. "It isn't a very big one, and I suppose a real burglar wouldn't have much trouble in opening it. But there aren't any burglars around here—there may be desperate men, but they're not burglars. They can't work the combination. Besides, we'll be on the lookout and watch, and you'll stay here all night, Jack, of course."

"Oh yes, thank you, Aunt Matilda. I'll stay as long as I'm not going back to Rainbow Ridge. And if any attempt is made to rob the safe, well, there'll be some trouble," and Jack took out his weapon to make sure that it was fully loaded.

"Oh!" Jennie exclaimed, I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Do what?"

"Flourish that revolver so recklessly. It makes me nervous."

"I'm not reckless," said Jack. "And I've got to be sure it will go off if I need it."

"I hope you won't need it," said the girl in a low voice.

The matter of Jack's staying having been decided, he helped Jennie sort the mail and express matter, so there would be no delay in the morning. For the pony express rider had determined to make an early start.

"I want to get those letters in the hands of Mr. Argent just as soon as I can," he said. "Then the worry will be off my mind."

"And it is a worry," Jennie admitted. "Any one might think that to have a mail route over these mountains wasn't very important, but things seem to have crowded in on you lately."

"You haven't had it altogether easy yourself," said Jack, as he thought of the bogus inspector. "Ever since I took dad's place there has been something to worry you."

"Well, it isn't your fault, Jack," she said. "It just seems to be a combination of circumstances, all more or less connected with Mr. Argent's mine. But perhaps this is the end and from now on everything will go along all right. I hope so!"

"So do I!" Jack declared. "Now I think I'll go over and have a look at the pony. I may have a bit of hard riding to do to-morrow, and I want him to be in good shape."

"Do you think they'll try again to-morrow to get this package away from you?" asked Jennie,

looking around the room apprehensively, as though some one might be lurking in the shadows.

"There's no telling," Jack responded.

He was glaid to get out in the air again for a little while. There was a fresh breeze blowing from the west, cold and refreshing from the distant mountains, and the air cleared away from Jack's head the last lingering feeling caused by the drug.

"Well, Sunger, old boy, they didn't get us that time, did they?" he asked as he went into the stall and petted his faithful animal. "They didn't get us though they tried mighty hard. We gave them a run for their money all right, and we'll do it again if they make another try. How are you, anyhow?"

He talked to the pony as though the plucky little fellow were human. And perhaps Sunger understood more than Jack gave him credit for doing. Certainly he had proved his intelligence that day.

Having seen that his mount, on which so much depended, was well bedded down and had enough food and water, Jack went back to the Blake home.

"And now for a pleasant evening," suggested Jennie. "We'll have a game of checkers, Jack. I think I can beat you this time, though you didn't give me half a chance the last time."

"I'll concede you two men," he said, smiling.

"No, indeed!" she exclaimed, half indignantly. "If I can't beat you evenly I don't want to win at all. Just because I'm a girl you'll handicap yourself!"

"Oh well have it your own way," he agreed, smiling at her energetic words.

"Well, isn't this better than riding on the lonesome mountain trail, thinking every minute you're going to be held up?" asked Jennie, when one game had been finished, Jack winning as usual.

"It certainly is!" he agreed, as he looked around the pleasant room. "But then, you know, business before pleasure."

"Not when it isn't absolutely necessary," remarked Mrs. Blake.

The living rooms of Jennie and her mother were upstairs, over the post office and the express department. There was a spare room that Jack used when he remained over night with his relatives.

"But I think I'll not sleep there to-night," he said, when preparations were being made for retiring.

"Why not?" asked Jennie.

"I want to be down here, near the safe," Jack replied, nodding toward the steel box in which the Argent letters and some registered mail had

been placed for security until morning. "I suppose nothing will happen," he went on, "but I shall feel better if I am down here."

"But there is no place to sleep—no bed," objected Jennie.

"A blanket and the soft side of a board will do for me," Jack answered, with a laugh. "I've camped out and slept on the ground often enough not to mind one night of discomfort. Don't worry, I'll be comfortable enough here."

"We can bring down the old lounge if you insist on sleeping here," Mrs. Blake said.

"Well, I should like to, if you don't mind," Jack answered. And so it was arranged. Jennie and her mother went up stairs, and Jack, without undressing, stretched out on the couch, pulling the blankets over him, for the night was cool with the approach of fall.

Jack's improvised bedroom was in a part of the post office, and in the room adjoining stood the safe, containing the valuable letters. By peering out of a nearby door Jack could have a glimpse of the strong box.

"Maybe I'll have my trouble for my pains," Jack reasoned, "but I'll worry less this way. I wonder if they'll really make any attempt to get in here?"

He hardly knew what to think. When he recalled the desperate chance Ryan had taken to

get possession of what he must have known was in the mail sack, Jack was sure the attempt would not easily be given up. But as the plotters had so far been successfully evaded and their tricks set at naught, it might be that they would give up now.

"It's about six of one and half a dozen of the other," Jack mused, "and I think the odds are in my favor."

He did not feel sleepy. Perhaps the after-effects of the drug were such as to produce an abnormally active state of the brain, and the brain must be quiet to have sleep come. For a time Jack lay quietly on his couch. Then he had an attack of the fidgets, and he tossed restlessly to and fro.

Up stairs all was quiet, and he hoped his aunt and cousin were sleeping in comfort. Now and then Jack assured himself that his revolver was ready to his hand. As the hours were ticked off on the office clock, Jack became more and more nervous.

"Come, this won't do!" he told himself. "I won't be fit for much to-morrow if I don't get some sleep, and I may have a hard day of it. Guess I'll get up and have a drink of water. I've heard that's a good thing to do when one can't sleep."

He tried to move about cautiously, so as not

to disturb Jennie and her mother. But as often happens when one moves about in the dark, objects are struck that one hardly knew were in the room. The things all seem to mass themselves under foot.

Jack banged into a table, and knocked over a chair.

"Oh!" screamed Jennie from the room above. "Mother! Jack! They've come!"

"It isn't anything—I just got up to get a drink," quickly explained Jack, wishing he had kept still. "Sorry to have disturbed you."

"I haven't been asleep," Jennie confessed, calling down the stairway. "Isn't it nearly morning?"

"A little after twelve," Jack reported, striking a match and looking at his watch.

Going back to his couch he soon found himself sinking off into a comfortable doze. He really needed natural sleep after his experience that day, and a little later he found it stealing over him. He turned on his side, and, before he knew it, was oblivious to his surroundings.

How long he slept Jack did not know, but he awoke with a start, and he was at once aware that his awakening had been caused by some sudden noise. For a moment he was so confused that he could not think clearly, or recall where he was.

He passed his hand across his head, and this slight action seemed to make his brain work. Then he sat up. He was at once aware that something unusual was going on.

There was a dim light shining in through the room where the safe was. And as Jack had left none burning, and as there were no street lights in Golden Crossing, the express rider at once realized that some one had brought a light into the room since he had fallen asleep.

Jack was about to call out, thinking perhaps his aunt or cousin had come down stairs, but he restrained himself.

"I'll just go and see who it is," he thought. A wild idea came to him. He reached under his pillow and brought out his revolver.

"If it's any of the outlaws I'll be ready," he murmured.

Moving with the silence of a cat, Jack, who had taken off his shoes, tiptoed to the door between the two rooms. As he advanced he could hear a succession of small noises. One was a sort of purring sound. Then came the tinkle of metal on metal—a faint sound that would not have been audible but for the deep silence over the place. Then Jack saw a flicker of the light, as though some one or some object had come near enough to it to produce a shadow.

Then, as Jack looked, he saw the outlines of

a man's head, and the man seemed bent over, or stooping. Again came the tinkle of metal on metal.

All at once the truth flashed into Jack's mind.

"They're going to blow open the safe!" was his thought. "It's the outlaws! I've caught 'em! They've drilled the safe and are going to blow it open!"

He managed, by going slowly, and trying each board with his foot advanced, to guard against a creak, finally to reach the door that opened into the room where the safe stood.

And there, kneeling on the floor in front of the strong box, was a masked man. He was in front of the safe, and a partly-opened dark lantern gave light enough for Jack to see what was going on.

The safe was not open, but, as Jack looked, and as he was about to give the command: "Hands up!" he saw the masked man suddenly spring back and slide, on rubber-soled shoes, to a far corner.

There was a tiny curl of smoke near the door of the safe. Jack realized, too late, what it was—the fuse attached to a charge of nitroglycerine. The safe was about to be blown open.

And then, ere Jack could spring forward and tear loose the fuse, the explosion came.

It was not loud, but the force of it blew Jack backward, knocking him down. His head hit on something and, for the moment, he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ESCAPE

JACK did not remain senseless long. When he recovered he became aware of a confused shouting, and an acrid smell of smoke filled his nostrils.

"Jack! Jack!" he heard Jennie and her mother shouting. "Jack, are you hurt?"

By a great effort, overcoming the faintness that seemed to be returning, Jack scrambled to his feet. It was dead black in the place now.

"I'm all right!" Jack cried, "but something has happened. They've been here all right. Stay up there until I call you."

He struck a match, for he had a box in readiness in his pocket.

A glance into the room where the safe stood showed what havoc had been wrought by the explosion. It was not much, for only a small charge had been used. But the door of the safe was blown off, and some damage was done to the fixtures and furniture of the place.

The interior of the strong box—for it was that and nothing more, being an old-fashioned safe—was plainly exposed to view. Jack was in front of it on the jump. Lighting another match he peered within.

"They're gone!" he cried aloud. "He's got the Argent letters! And me sleeping right beside them! This is fierce!"

With trembling fingers, and a deep sense of humiliation in his heart, Jack lighted a lamp. But even with this greater light there was no trace of the missing packet. Only that seemed to have been taken, as far as Jack could make out.

But now Jennie and her mother, frightened and alarmed, were begging to know what had happened. There was no trace of the masked man. He had slipped out while Jack lay unconscious, out hero thought. Though, indeed, he felt little like a hero just then.

"Oh, Jack, what is it? Can't we come down? Are you hurt?" Jennie begged.

"No, I'm not hurt. Come down if you like. They blew open the safe!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake, and there was fear and alarm in her voice. Certainly any one might fear those unscrupulous outlaws, who seemed to halt at nothing to gain their ends.

For a moment Jack gazed dumbly at the ruin wrought. His eyes sought for some trace of the

package he had done so much to bring through with safety, but which, after all, had been taken while he slept. Certainly it was an unfortunate and distressing affair.

"Oh, isn't it awful!" gasped Jennie, as she and her mother picked their way through the confusion of furniture in the room, and looked at the looted safe. "It's just terrible!"

"Jack, sound an alarm at once!" cried Mrs. Blake, recognizing the need for quick action. "Fire your revolver out of the window—yell—do something!"

"Of course! And here I stand like a booby!" Jack cried. "We must get a posse after that fellow!"

An open window showed how the robber had entered and gone. Jack thrust his weapon outside and fired the five shots in quick succession. The explosion by which the safe was shattered did not appear to have roused any of the townspeople. Probably the report was too muffled to carry far.

But Jack's shots, ringing out in the open, were heard, and soon windows began to go up. Heads were thrust out, and there came many demands to know what was going on.

"Post office safe blown and robbed!" cried Jack. "It was done by one man, though there may have been more. We must get after them!"

"That's what we must!" cried Tim Mullane, one of the first on the scene.

Jack slipped on his shoes, and, with a lantern, hurried across to where Sunger was stabled. As he approached the place the open door made his heart sink.

"If he has taken Sunger—" he faltered.

"That was what the masked robber had done. The pony's stall was vacant. Jack felt a fierce longing to do something desperate. This was the last straw.

"Sunger gone! Sunger gone!" Jack repeated, blankly.

He did not want to believe it, but there was nothing else to do. The masked robber had made his escape on Jack's speedy mount.

By this time all those living in the vicinity of the post office were aroused. They came, hastily dressed, mostly men and boys, to crowd into the small place and look at the wrecked safe.

"That job was done by professionals all right," said the town marshal. "That's no amateur work. He just put some of the nitroglycerine in a crack between the door and the casing, or maybe in a hole he bored, and touched it off with a fuse. Yes, it was a neat job."

"Neat!" Jock exclaimed, rather indignantly. "When he took that valuable package? Neat!"

"Oh well, you know what I mean," the mar-

shal said. "Now, boys, we've got to get after these fellows, and get after them hard!"

"I only saw one," Jack put in.

"Well, he probably had confederates. Now, boys, get your horses and we'll hit the trail. There's only two he could take, and we'll cover 'em both. You come along, too, Jack, that is if you feel able. I see you got a cut on your head."

Jack put up his hand. It came away bloody, and Jennie screamed.

"It's only a little cut where I fell, when the force of the explosion knocked me down," Jack said. Up to then, so great had been the excitement, he had not been aware of the slight injury.

"Well get on your pony then, and come along," the marshal urged him. "We'll want you to identify the fellow if we catch him. That is if you can."

"I'm not sure I could," Jack said. "I only saw his back, and he wore a mask."

"Well, come along anyhow. Hop on your pony and—"

"I can't!" Jack exclaimed. "The fellow took Sunger!"

"He did!" the marshal cried. "Well, now we certainly must get him! If he's a horse thief, as well as a safe-blower we sure will get him! Scatter, boys! Be lively! Jack, I'll lend you a horse. Come on now. Jim Hickey, you lead one

bunch over the Tuckerton trail, and I'll head another on the road to Rainbow Ridge. But most likely the fellow will take to the mountains and hide out for a spell."

"He won't be very likely to go to Rainbow Ridge," said Jack.

"Why not?"

"Because he's got a valuable package of letters and mining documents addressed to Mr. Argent of that place. He wouldn't go there."

"I don't know," returned the marshal. "He wouldn't stay there, but he might go through that way."

It did not take long to organize two posses, and Jack went with the one led by the marshal. The young express rider bestrode a borrowed steed, and though it was good enough, as horses go, it was not at all like his beloved Sunger.

"I wonder if I'll ever get him back," mused the lad, as he trotted along beside the others.

"A measly horse thief!" muttered the marshal. "We'll get him if it takes a year."

In the West horse-stealing is a crime almost on a par with killing; for out there a man's life often depends on his horse, and if a thief takes the horse away he may also be responsible for the death of the man. That is why horse-stealing is visited with such swift and sure vengeance when the culprit is caught.

Since there was a moon that night, there was fairly good light to see to follow the mountain trails. The robber had not much of a start, but he was riding Jack's fleet pony, and that, in itself, meant a great deal, for there were few horses in that part of the country who could distance him.

Over the trails they rode, and, as they went, the hope of soon catching the robber grew less and less.

"I'm afraid he's escaped us all right," the marshal said, ruefully. "But we'll get him yet. I'll never let a horse thief get the best of me!"

"You seem to forget that he also took those valuable letters," Jack remarked.

"No, I'm not forgetting it," the marshal said, "but to my way of thinking that ain't half so bad a crime as taking your horse. And I'd say the same thing if he took any other horse, or one of mine. "I just naturally hate a horse thief!"

"That's right!" chimed in several of the men in the posse.

There were no places, or, rather, only one or two places, along the mountain trail, where inquiries could be made as to whether or not the robber—or some night-rider—had passed. But at such lonely cabins as Jack and his friends came to they roused the inmates and put their questions.

"Seems to me I did hear a hoss gallopin' about an hour back," said one old man. "I thought

maybe it was the pony express goin' through, though, so I didn't pay no attention."

"I wish it had been the pony express," murmured Jack regretfully. "If I had taken the letters on the night ride I might have gotten safely through with them."

"I don't hardly believe it," the marshal told him. "I guess those outlaws were watching the trail. They were bound to get them, and when they found you weren't going through with 'em they came in and blowed the safe."

"I suppose so," murmured Jack.

CHAPTER XXIV

JACK'S IDEA

MORNING came. At least the dawn was heralded in the east, where the dark clouds turned to pink, growing brighter and brighter, until the sun himself peeped above the horizon.

The posse with which Jack was riding had come almost all the way to Rainbow Ridge, and so far had not had a sight of the robber or any of his confederates, if he had any, which was scarcely to be doubted.

"Well, boys, we may as well go back, I guess," the marshal said. "We'll have to organize a regular hunt, and scatter through the mountains. But we'll have to go back and get some grub. I'm getting hungry, and a man can't hunt a horse thief on an empty stomach."

"That's right!" several of the men agreed.

"Why not keep on?" some one asked. "We can get to Rainbow Ridge quicker than we can to Golden Crossing."

"That's true," added Jack. "I'd ask you all

to our cabin, but there's nothing there to eat, since dad is being taken care of by Mrs. Watson."

"Oh, we can get grub easily enough," the sheriff said. "I guess it will be as well to go on to Rainbow Ridge. We want to spread the news there anyhow, and get some men out after the robbers from this end. And I suppose you'll have to report the robbery, won't you?" he asked Jack.

"Yes," replied the pony express rider, and his voice was sad. "I'll have to admit that they got the best of me."

"Oh, shucks! It wasn't your fault at all!" declared the marshal. "Those fellows were bound to get the letters, and if they didn't one way they would another. You couldn't help it."

"But I was asleep right alongside the safe."

"Yes, but maybe they chloroformed you. Such things have been done."

"No, that wasn't done," declared Jack with conviction.

"Well, you'd gone through enough, in that drugging business, to make anybody tired enough to sleep hard," one man said. "They can't blame you."

"No indeed!" agreed another.

But Jack blamed himself. He felt that he had failed in his trust. He did not know what to do. His brain seemed incapable of thinking. If he

could only catch the robber and get back the letters!

As he went along with the others over the mountain trail in the early morning, he looked eagerly about, as though he might see some sign of the much-wanted rascal. But the trail was deserted, save for the posse.

They rode into Rainbow Ridge, and that place was soon buzzing with the startling news. As soon as possible a number of men were started out through the mountains, to cover even the bridle paths and trails seldom used. All strangers who could not give a good account of themselves were to be brought into the town.

Mr. Argent was told of the stealing of the valuable letters. He looked grave when Jack explained what had taken place.

"Of course it isn't your fault, Jack," the miner said, "and I'm not in the least blaming you."

"I wanted to come through with them last night, but—"

"It probably wouldn't have done any good, and you might have been attacked and hurt. I'm glad that didn't happen. Of course losing the papers is going to make it very bad for my friends and myself in making good our claim to the mine. But it can't be helped. You did the best you could. No one could have done more. That was a plucky thing you did—tying yourself on the pony's back

when you felt you were going to become unconscious."

"But it didn't result in any good in the end," said Jack bitterly. "And now Sunger is gone, too."

'That's too bad. But still we may catch this fellow. So my package was the only one he took?"

"Well, I didn't stay until all the mail was checked up," answered Jack, "but I'm sure that was missing from the opened safe. I half hoped that this might be another dummy package," said Jack, "and that your other letters might be in the one addressed to the postmaster here."

"No such luck!" exclaimed the miner. "The package addressed to me contained the real and important letters and mine plans that I've been expecting so long. There was some stuff for me in that other package you mention, but it isn't important.

"I wish now," he went on, ruefully, "that I had had a dummy package come through. But I worked that plan once, and I didn't think it would have an effect a second time. Well, it's all in the game, and if I lose this inning I may make it up later. But whatever happens, Jack, don't in the least feel that I blame you."

"Well, it's awfully good of you to say so," replied the pony rider, "but I can't help feeling bad about it."

"Oh, I feel bad myself," the miner said. "But there's no use crying over spilled molasses."

"I think you mean milk," Jack corrected, with a smile.

"Well, perhaps I do. Anyhow the thing to do now is to see if we can't round up these fellows. For there were more than one of them, though you only saw one at the safe. I have an idea who some of them are, too."

As soon as it was seen that a hasty and quick search was not going to result in the capture of the robber and his confederates, a well-planned organized hunt was instituted, to take in as much as possible of the surrounding mountain country. Jack could not take part in this, as he had to ride the express route.

At first he feared lest he might be discharged for having been robbed, but, as a matter of fact, technically he was not in the least to blame. The matter taken was not in his charge, but was in the safe in a post office, and his responsibility ended with the delivery of the mail. Nor was Jennie Blake blamed. The post office authorities did not in the least censure her or her mother. In fact they paid them the compliment, and Jack, too, of saying that extraordinary precautions had been taken, but that the robbery had occurred in spite of them.

Another point was that no express stuff was

taken, but only United States' mail. And so the express people had no complaint against Jack, or any one else, as they had lost nothing. Such being the case, there was no good reason for displacing Jack, especially as the robbery had not occurred on his route. So those who hoped to get his position were disappointed.

"You can keep right on riding for us, Jack, my boy," said Mr. Perkfeld. "We're glad to have you. It isn't often we get as plucky a lad as you. And when your father gets well, and wants his place back, he can have it, and I'll find an opening for you on another route, if you like."

"I certainly would like!" Jack exclaimed, warmly.

In addition to the posse organized in Golden Crossing and Rainbow Ridge the post office authorities also sent out inspectors and detectives to try and round up the robbers. This was done the day after it occurred, so that within forty-eight hours the mountain trails were being well patrolled by men eager to apprehend the offenders. And in the mountains, off the trails, were others on the same errand. Jack wished he could be with them, but he had to keep to the mail and express route.

As far as Mr. Argent could learn, no use had yet been made of the stolen documents.

"And that is a good sign," he said to Jack.

"I'v been in touch with matters, and I and my friends would know as soon as some use was made of them. The people who could best use those documents would have an injunction out against us in a jiffy, and be in possession of the mine as soon as they laid their hands on the papers. But they haven't got them yet, that's sure."

"What does that mean?" asked Jack.

"Just this. Those who would gain the greatest advantage from the possession of our papers, which would give them control of the mine, didn't do the actual stealing themselves. They hired these outlaws to do it, and from the fact that no action has been taken makes me sure that the robber who blew open the safe and took the letters, has not had a chance to deliver them."

"You mean he has them in his possession yet?"

"That's about it, Jack. He is probably hiding out somewhere in the mountains, waiting for a chance to deliver them. He dare not mail them, and he can't get in touch with the rascals who hired him or worked with him. And if any of our men see him first, why we'll save the day yet."

"Good!" cried Jack. "I wish it would be my luck to nab him!"

"Yes. And I suppose you want your pony back?"

"Do I?" cried Jack, and there was no mistaking his longing.

He had provided himself with another horse to ride the mountain trail, and, though it was good, still it was not Sunger.

Mrs. Blake and Jennie were very nervous after the safe robbery, and Mrs. Blake wanted her daughter to give up the post office. But the plucky girl would not.

"They won't bother us again," she said. "It's like lightning. It won't happen the second time in the same place. I'm not afraid, though I am a little shaken."

The damage done by the explosion was soon repaired, and a new and more up-to-date safe provided by the post office department.

It was a week after this momentous occurrence that one afternoon, as Jack was riding along the trail from Golden Crossing to Rainbow Ridge, he stopped to water his horse at the lonely cabin where the old man, on the night of the chase, had told of hearing some one riding past, he thinking it was the pony express.

"Well, Jack," asked the old man, as the lad paused for a moment's chat, "they didn't catch that there safe burglar, did they?"

"No, haven't seen a trace of him, worse luck! Anybody been along to-day?"

"Why, yes, there was a feller here not long ago. He stopped for a drink, and asked for a bite to eat. He looked as if he was in hard luck."

"What sort of a fellow was he?"

"Oh well, I didn't take particular notice. He was afoot."

"Afoot?" cried Jack. "That's queer."

"I thought so myself," agreed the old man. And it was queer to see a man traveling afoot in a country where riding and driving was universal. "I asked him where his horse was, and he said down the road a piece!"

"That was also queer," Jack said. "I wonder why he didn't ride right up here? No excuse for walking when one has a horse."

"That's what I thought," the old man went on. "But I didn't want to ask too many questions. He didn't seem relishin' answerin' 'em."

"Which way was he going?" asked the pony express lad.

"Towards Rainbow Ridge. It wa'n't more'n ten minutes ago."

As Jack rode off a sudden thought came to him.

"I wonder if this could be a clew to the robber?" he asked himself. "Queer thing about his not riding his horse up to Ford's cabin. Why should he do that unless he was afraid the horse would be recognized. Why should he—Great

Scott!" suddenly exclaimed Jack aloud. "I believe I know why. He had Sunger, and didn't dare let Ford see him! That's it! I believe I'm on the track of the man who has my pony and the Argent letters!"

CHAPTER XXV

JACK'S TRICK—CONCLUSION

JACK called to his horse, which really was a speedy mount.

"Come on, old boy!" he cried. "You may not be as good as Sunger, but he's had a hard time lately, being kept out among the mountains, and I don't believe he's up to the mark. We may catch him if that fellow stays to the road, though ordinarily my pony would run away from you, Dobbin."

Jack didn't care much what he called this horse. But he really liked the animal, as he did all horseflesh, and the beast responded readily to him.

On they swept down the mountain trail. Jack's eyes watched eagerly as he made turn after turn at top speed; but for some time he saw no signs of any rider ahead of him.

"There's no way of getting off on a side trail for the next half mile," reflected Jack, as he rode on. "If I can come up to him in that distance I'll have him."

He felt to see if his revolver was in readiness. He did not know just what he would do, but it was a desperate situation, or it would be if he should overtake the fellow.

And luck was with Jack—luck and good judgment. As he made the last turn in that part of the trail from which there was no escape by a side road, he saw, just ahead of him, a rider on a horse which Jack knew in a moment.

"That's Sunger!" he cried. "I've found him!"

Of course Jack could not be sure that the man on his pony was the same one who had robbed the safe. But Jack knew his own steed, and when, out West, a man is found riding a stolen horse, it is prime evidence against him. He has to prove his case, and is subject to arrest on sight. Of course he may have innocently acquired the stolen animal; but he has to prove this to be the case.

"That's my pony, and I'm going to have him back!" thought Jack. "And I'm going to get that man, too! Come on, boy!"

For one of the few times in his life Jack used the whip. But he was humane. His horse responded with a burst of speed. But now the man ahead, hearing galloping hoofs behind him, urged on Sunger. And Sunger still could run. Though Jack saw, with regret, that his pony had suffered,

still the wonderful speed of the animal had abated but little.

"He's going to get away from me!" cried the lad, as he saw how Sunger was running. "And that's the man, else why should he try to escape?"

Then Jack began to think quickly. He had trained Sunger to halt instantly when he called "Whoa!" to him, in a certain tone. If the animal were going at top speed, and Jack yelled that word, Sunger would brace up with his fore feet, slide with his hind ones, and bring up standing, like a train of cars when the engineer throws on the emergency air brakes.

Of course Jack was never in the saddle when he worked this trick with Sunger. Had he been he might have been hurt. But he had given his pony this training so that in going down dangerous slopes Sunger would know how to bring himself suddenly to a halt.

"I wonder if I can make him hear," thought Jack. "If I can, and if he'll stop, there'll be something doing in a minute."

Jack saw that he could not hope to overtake the man ahead of him by an ordinary chase. The horse the pony rider bestrode was not fast enough. And a short distance ahead was a place on the trail where the suspect could escape by a side path.

"Here goes!" murmured Jack.

In his loudest voice he cried out:

"Whoa, Sunger!"

Something happened at once. The pony, which had been running his best in order not to let the horse behind pass him, pulled up so short that the man was flung with great force from the saddle, and over Sunger's head. Over he went, vainly trying to save himself, and the next moment he landed heavily on the side of the trail and did not move.

"Well, I guess that ends your riding for a time," thought Jack, grimly. Then he rode forward while Sunger, with a whinny of delight, turned back to meet his master.

"Oh, Sunger! Sunger, old boy! You did it!" cried Jack. Then his heart smote him as he saw the motionless figure beside the trail.

Pausing only a moment to caress his recovered pony, Jack hastened to the side of the man who had been thrown off by Sunger's sudden stopping. The fellow was a stranger to Jack, who could not tell whether or not he was the post office robber. The man was unconscious, and, with little compunction, Jack rapidly searched through his pockets.

In an inner one he came upon a package. With beating heart Jack pulled out the bundle. He knew it in a moment. It was the packet of letters addressed to Mr. Argent. A look at the

seals convinced the lad that they had not been broken.

"Talk about luck!" he cried, "I'm certainly in it to-day! I've got Sunger, got the papers back, and caught the robber, too. At least I think he must be the safe-cracker, though I can't be sure. I've got him right! Sunger, old boy, we worked the trick to perfection!"

Jack thrust the strangely-recovered package into his pocket, and then gave more attention to the man. He lay senseless, and from the manner in which one leg was doubled up under him Jack felt sure it was broken.

"But it couldn't be helped," he mused. "I had to stop you, and you brought it on yourself. I'll go and get help for you, though."

Jack worked quickly. His first care was for his pony, who was delightedly rubbing his velvet nose against his master. Sunger did not appear to have suffered so much as Jack had feared.

"I guess you can ride trail yet," Jack mused. "I'll use you in place of Dobbin."

He transferred the mail sacks to his own pony, and then rode back to the cabin, taking the other horse with him.

"For you might come to, and manage to ride off," Jack said looking at the unconscious man. But the fellow did not. He was still senseless when the help sent by Jack reached him.

As for our hero, he rode post-haste into Rainbow Ridge, where, after stopping but a moment to tell his father the good news, he hastened to deliver the recovered packet to Mr. Argent and tell his news.

"Say, you don't mean to say you have it Jack!" cried the miner. "Why, that's great! And it's all here, too—every paper!" he added as he broke the seals and made a quick examination. "Now everything will be all right, and we'll start to work the mine. That fellow you caught didn't have time to deliver the goods and didn't dare go where he could do so. It was a great trick! Great!"

Jack was pretty well pleased with himself.

The rest of the story is soon told. The man whom Jack had caught by the trick of making the pony stop suddenly was not mortally hurt, though a broken leg, and other injuries laid him up for some time. He confessed he was the safe-robber, and a member of the outlaw gang that had been engaged by the enemies of Mr. Argent to get possession of the papers.

And, as the miner had surmised, the trails had been so quickly and closely watched and guarded, that he had had no chance to communicate with those who engaged him, to give them the papers he stole from the safe. He and Ryan, as well as others, had worked together to waylay Jack, or,

in any manner they could, get possession of the documents.

This much was learned from the man's confession, and, though he did not disclose the whereabouts of his confederates, they were captured a little later, and sent to prison for long terms. Jack's testimony went far in this, for he indentified Ryan, as well as the bogus post office inspector, who was also one of the men who held him up.

Ryan was among the first arrested, and admitted that he had planned for some time to drug Jack, and had seen his opportunity the day the pony went lame.

Not only was Mr. Argent's mine secured to him, and the pony express route rendered safe by the capture of the outlaw band, but several other crimes in the vicinity were cleared up. The gang was at the bottom of them.

"Well, I only wish I could be cleared of suspicion in that Harrington matter," said Mr. Bailey one day, a month or so later, when he had so far recovered that he was thinking of going back to the pony express route.

"Maybe you will be. The trials of those fellows aren't ended yet," Jack said. "Maybe something will come out in them."

And that is just what happened. In the testimony, it was brought out that, for some time,

confederates of the outlaws, of whom Jake Tantrell was one, had been trying to get for one of their number the position of pony express rider. They thought if they did this they would have no trouble in robbing the mail.

One of these unscrupulous men was responsible for the leakage of the information contained in the Harrington letter. This was admitted, and Mr. Bailey was cleared of all blame in the matter.

It was Tantrell, too, who loosened the planks in the bridge, just as Jack suspected.

"Well, that makes me feel fine!" Mr. Bailey said, when the good news came to him. "It's all your doings, Jack, catching that fellow!"

"No, it's Sunger's," Jack said, with a laugh. "If he hadn't learned the trick of stopping suddenly the man might have gotten away, and the mine might have been lost to Mr. Argent."

"But it wasn't lost," said the miner, "and as a little reward for your pluck and services, Jack, I'm going to give you a small interest in one of my mines, for I have two."

"Oh, I don't want any reward!"

"But you're going to need it some day. You can save the income for the time when you'll want to get married; eh?" and he pinched Jennie's blushing cheek.

Jennie didn't say anything. But she looked at

Jack, and he would have blushed as red as she, only he could not. He was too tanned.

In due time Mr. Bailey fully recovered, and was able to take up his former work of riding pony express. Jack regretted giving it up, glad as he was to have his father out again. But Mr. Perkfeld was as good as his word, and Jack soon had another route to ride, and one where he could see Jennie nearly as often as before.

Jennie still kept her place as postmistress at Golden Crossing, but there was no more danger from the outlaws or the bogus inspector, as they had the prospect of long terms in prison before them.

"And when they do come out you won't be working in the office here any more," said Jack, with a smile.

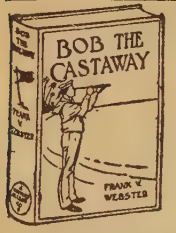
"How do you know?" Jennie asked demurely.

"Oh, I just guess it," was the answer, and he looked at Jennie in a way that meant a good deal.

THE END.

THE WEBSTER SERIES

By FRANK V. WEBSTER



Mr. WEBSTER'S style is very much like that of the boys' favorite author, the late lamented Horatio Alger, Jr., but his tales are thoroughly up-to-date.

Cloth. 12mo. Over 200 pages each. Illustrated. Stamped in various colors.

Price per volume, 65 cents, postpaid.

Only A Farm Boy
or Dan Hardy's Rise in Life

The Boy From The Ranch
or Roy Bradner's City Experiences

The Young Treasure Hunter
or Fred Stanley's Trip to Alaska

The Boy Pilot of the Lakes
or Nat Morton's Perils

Tom The Telephone Boy
or The Mystery of a Message

Bob The Castaway
or The Wreck of the Eagle

The Newsboy Partners
or Who Was Dick Boxt?

Two Boy Gold Miners
or Lost in the Mountains

The Young Firemen of Lakeville
or Herbert Dare's Pluck

The Boys of Bellwood School
or Frank Jordan's Triumph

Jack the Runaway
or On the Road with a Circus

Bob Chester's Grit
or From Ranch to Riches

Airship Andy
or The Luck of a Brave Boy

High School Rivals
or Fred Markham's Struggles

Darry The Life Saver
or The Heroes of the Coast

Dick The Bank Boy
or A Missing Fortune

Ben Hardy's Flying Machine
or Making a Record for Himself

Harry Watson's High School Days
or The Rivals of Rivertown

Comrades of the Saddle
or The Young Rough Riders of the Plains

Tom Taylor at West Point
or The Old Army Officer's Secret

The Boy Scouts of Lennox
or Hiking Over Big Bear Mountain

The Boys of the Wireless
or a Stirring Rescue from the Deep

Cowboy Dave
or The Round-up at Rolling River

Jack of the Pony Express
or The Young Rider of the Mountain Trail

The Boys of the Battleship
or For the Honor of Uncle Sam

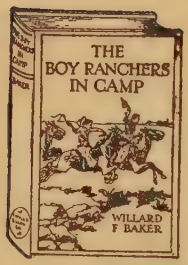
CUPPLES & LEON CO., Publishers, NEW YORK

THE BOY RANCHERS SERIES

BY WILLARD F. BAKER

12mo. Cloth. Illustrated. Jacket in full colors

Price per volume, 65 cents, postpaid



Stories of the great west, with cattle ranches as a setting, related in such a style as to captivate the hearts of all boys.

1. THE BOY RANCHERS
or Solving the Mystery at Diamond X

Two eastern boys visit their cousin. They become involved in an exciting mystery.

2. THE BOY RANCHERS IN CAMP
or The Water Fight at Diamond X

Returning for a summer visit to their western cousin's ranch, the two eastern lads learn, with delight, that they are to be allowed to become boy ranchers in earnest.

3. THE BOY RANCHERS ON THE TRAIL
or The Diamond X After Cattle Rustlers

Our boy heroes take the trail after Del Pinzo and his outlaws.

4. THE BOY RANCHERS AMONG THE INDIANS
or Trailing the Yaquis

Rosemary and Floyd visiting their cousins Bud, Nort and Dick, are captured by the Yaqui Indians. The boy ranchers trail the savages into the mountains and eventually effect the rescue.

5. THE BOY RANCHERS AT SPUR CREEK
or Fighting the Sheep Herders

Dangerous struggle against desperadoes for land rights brings out heroic adventures.

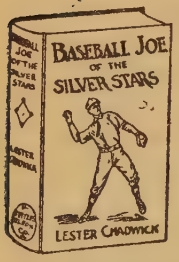
Send For Our Free Illustrated Catalogue

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY, Publishers **New York**

THE BASEBALL JOE SERIES

By LESTER CHADWICK

12*mo.* *Illustrated.* *Price per volume,* $1.00, *postpaid*



BASEBALL JOE OF THE SILVER STARS
or The Rivals of Riverside
Joe is an everyday country boy who loves to play baseball and particularly to pitch.

BASEBALL JOE ON THE SCHOOL NINE
or Pitching for the Blue Banner
Joe's great ambition was to go to boarding school and play on the school team.

BASEBALL JOE AT YALE
or Pitching for the College Championship
In his second year at Yale Joe becomes a varsity pitcher.

BASEBALL JOE IN THE CENTRAL LEAGUE
or Making Good as a Professional Pitcher
From Yale College to a baseball league of our Central States.

BASEBALL JOE IN THE BIG LEAGUE
or A Young Pitcher's Hardest Struggles
From the Central League Joe goes to the St. Louis Nationals.

BASEBALL JOE ON THE GIANTS
or Making Good as a Twirler in the Metropolis
Joe was traded to the Giants and became their mainstay.

BASEBALL JOE IN THE WORLD SERIES
or Pitching for the Championship
What Joe did to win the series will thrill the most jaded reader.

BASEBALL JOE AROUND THE WORLD
or Pitching on a Grand Tour
The Giants and the All-Americans tour the world.

BASEBALL JOE: HOME RUN KING
or The Greatest Pitcher and Batter on Record
Joe becomes the greatest batter in the game.

BASEBALL JOE SAVING THE LEAGUE
or Breaking Up a Great Conspiracy
Throwing the game meant a fortune but also dishonor.

BASEBALL JOE CAPTAIN OF THE TEAM
or Bitter Struggles on the Diamond
Joe is elevated to the position of captain.

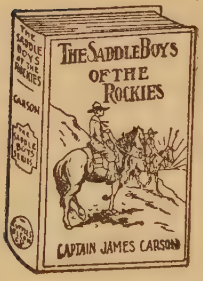
BASEBALL JOE CHAMPION OF THE LEAGUE
or The Record that was Worth While
Joe's enemies hatch out a plot to put his pitching arm out of commission.

Send For Our Free Illustrated Catalogue

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY, Publishers **New York**

THE BOYS' OUTING LIBRARY

12mo. Cloth. Illustrated. Jacket in full color.
Price, per volume, 65 cents, postpaid.



THE SADDLE BOYS SERIES

By CAPT. JAMES CARSON

The Saddle Boys of the Rockies
The Saddle Boys in the Grand Canyon
The Saddle Boys on the Plains
The Saddle Boys at Circle Ranch
The Saddle Boys on Mexican Trails

THE DAVE DASHAWAY SERIES

By ROY ROCKWOOD

Dave Dashaway the Young Aviator
Dave Dashaway and His Hydroplane
Dave Dashaway and His Giant Airship
Dave Dashaway Around the World
Dave Dashaway: Air Champion

THE SPEEDWELL BOYS SERIES

By ROY ROCKWOOD

The Speedwell Boys on Motorcycles
The Speedwell Boys and Their Racing Auto
The Speedwell Boys and Their Power Launch
The Speedwell Boys in a Submarine
The Speedwell Boys and Their Ice Racer

THE TOM FAIRFIELD SERIES

By ALLEN CHAPMAN

Tom Fairfield's School Days
Tom Fairfield at Sea
Tom Fairfield in Camp
Tom Fairfield's Pluck and Luck
Tom Fairfield's Hunting Trip

THE FRED FENTON ATHLETIC SERIES

By ALLEN CHAPMAN

Fred Fenton the Pitcher
Fred Fenton in the Line
Fred Fenton on the Crew
Fred Fenton on the Track
Fred Fenton: Marathon Runner

Send For Our Free Illustrated Catalogue.

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY, Publishers **New York**